スレイヤーズすぺしゃる⑮

エイプリルの事件簿

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 15

April's Case Files

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For more: visit
tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Note: In this volume we finally get to see Lina the pink's robes of title! This is lore important so I've kept the illustration in.This book also contains the story that became Slayers Excellent Episode 3.

April’s Case Files (Part 1)

Stomp!

With a synchronized thud of footsteps, a group clad entirely in black surrounded me the moment I stepped into town. I instinctively braced myself for a fight, but then, one woman from the group of ten stepped forward.

"Forgive me for asking so abruptly," she began, "but do you possess a 'Gown of Title'?"

She stared straight at me with piercing blue eyes from beneath the deep shadows of her hood.

—Sorcerers.—

Every single person lined up before me was dressed in the quintessential sorcerer style: black robes, black hoods, and black capes.

"Did... something happen?" I asked in return.

She shifted her gaze slightly at my question and replied in a somewhat masculine tone, "***I'm afraid I can’t discuss that here***."

Hmm... I see...

I leaned in closer to her and lowered my voice. "***This is an Association-related incident, isn't it***?"

At those words, her left eyebrow gave a sharp, tiny twitch. "Whatever makes you think that?"

"Well, I mean... look at the situation," I said. "A large group of sorcerers is on the move, and the first thing they ask a mage entering town is whether they have a Gown of Title. It’s only natural to assume there’s been some sort of trouble regarding one."

For context, you can think of a Gown of Title as a sort of diploma or award for a sorcerer. When a mage’s achievements or skills are officially recognized, their

Sorcerers' Association might grant them a colored title along with a cape and robe of that matching color. That is what we call a Gown of Title.

Whether you wear it every day or keep it buried in the back of your closet is up to the individual. However, since you don't get a spare if it gets damaged, not many people actually wear them. For that matter, I received one myself back in my hometown of Zephilia, but...

Anyway, I continued. "And since it’s you guys moving and not the local officials, I'm guessing it isn't anything as heavy as a murder. Harassment, maybe? Or theft? Something on that level."

"Not bad!"

The woman suddenly lunged forward and grabbed both of my hands in a tight grip. "It’s decided! As of this moment, I, April Landmark, appoint you as my assistant!"

".....Huh?"

"Now then, let us head to the Association immediately for a detailed briefing on the case."

"Wait... hey... hold on a second!?"

Ignoring my protests, she began dragging me away. And so, amidst the confusion, I found myself swept up in this bothersome affair.

"The crime was discovered about ten days ago."

We were in the reception room of the Sorcerers' Association. Sitting across from me over a table set with aromatic tea, she began her tale—for some reason using a dramatic, narrating tone. The other sorcerers, by the way, were still stationed at the town entrance.

In this setting, she had her hood down. She looked slightly older than me, with short blonde hair and refined, if somewhat expressionless, features. She was what you’d call an intellectual beauty.

"A Gown of Title belonging to Council Chairman Flammard of the Cerulean City Sorcerers' Association was stolen by a person or persons unknown. As the investigation

proceeded, it was discovered that the Gowns belonging to the two Vice-Chairmen had also been stolen! All the incidents occurred within this Association building. To solve the mystery, Chairman Flammard appointed me—April, known to those around me as the 'Greatest Detective of the Cerulean Association' and the 'Purple Brain Cells'—as the lead investigator! And well, that brings us up to speed. Do you follow?"

"Er... yeah... I guess..." I nodded vaguely.

But... 'Purple Brain Cells'? Doesn't that usually imply your brain is rotting...?

"Excellent. Oh, come to think of it, I haven't asked your name yet."

"I'm Lina. Lina Inverse."

"What!?"

At my name, April practically vaulted out of her chair with an absurdly over-the-top reaction. "Lina Inverse!? You mean *the* Lina Inverse!?"

"I'm going to choose not to think about what you mean by '*the*,' but... yeah, I'm probably '*that*' Lina Inverse."

"Wonderful!" Her eyes sparkled despite my grumpy reply. "This is perfect! You are the ultimate candidate for a Great Detective's assistant!"

"You... you think so?" I didn't love being called an "assistant," but being told I was the "ultimate" anything didn't feel too bad.

"Indeed! I shall handle the mental labor, and you shall handle the violence! A magnificent combination!"

"Hey now..."

"Furthermore, just as a pinch of salt enhances the sweetness of sugar, you shall serve as the perfect foil to highlight my own feminine charm...!"

"**—Damp Vents!**"

KABOOM!

The "incident" very nearly escalated into a murder case right then and there.

"Being so immersed in my deductions that I lose sight of my surroundings... it is a

common trait of the genius detective. It is nothing to be ashamed of, Lina-kun."

"And? Anything else to say?"

"....."

April remained silent for a while as I glared down at her. Finally, she muttered, "...I was wrong. I shall endeavor not to say it again."

"Good. Honesty is a virtue." I nodded firmly. "By the way, if you're the investigator and I'm the assistant, I assume there's a proper commission fee for me?"

"Of course." She climbed back into her chair and nodded decisively. "Upon the resolution of the case, twenty gold coins are guaranteed."

"Hoh..."

For a job involving the Sorcerers' Association—who are notoriously cheap—that wasn't a bad sum. It wasn't a fortune, but it wasn't an insult either. Plus, helping the Association out of a jam usually pays off in the long run.

"In that case, let's get this investigation moving and wrap this up quick!"

I headed for the door, but—

"That's not how it works!" *Chop!*

"Ow!?"

April's hand collided with the back of my head.

"Hey! What was that for!?"

She looked at me with arched eyebrows. "I should be asking you that! You are strictly the assistant! The job of a mystery assistant is to wander around aimlessly, get targeted by the culprit, and ask stupid questions like, 'So, what do we do next?' You must never take charge of the scene!"

"Is... is that so? I mean, it sounds like it doesn't matter if I'm there or not..."

"Incorrect, Lina-kun!" She pointed dramatically toward a random corner of the room. "There are vital duties, such as occasionally brawling with the culprit and letting them escape mid-case, or unknowingly picking up a crucial piece of evidence and being

shocked when the detective points it out to you!"

Are those... actually vital...?

"Regardless! I have appointed you as my 'Assistant.' You will act accordingly! Understood?"

"Fine, fine... I get it." I wasn't entirely convinced, but it wasn't worth arguing if she decided to lower my pay. I gave a submissive nod. "So, April, have you narrowed down the suspects?"

"I am nothing if not thorough, Lina-kun. We have two primary suspects. First, Patrick Henderson, who failed to receive a Gown of Title again this year. Second, Flagan Canaan, whose Gown was revoked after a certain scandal."

"I see..."

"Don't just say 'I see'!" *Chop!*

"Ow! Again!?"

"In this situation, you are supposed to immediately ask, 'Why are those two suspicious?' Then I reply, 'It's elementary, my dear assistant,' and provide a logical explanation for my deductions!"

"I don't need an explanation! Just hearing their names makes their motives painfully obvious!"

"Obvious or not! A detective's assistant's job is to pretend they haven't noticed! That is the role!"

"Do you... by any chance... think 'Detective's Assistant' is a synonym for 'idiot'?"

"Of course not! I am simply being honest: if the assistant is too sharp, the detective doesn't stand out, and I don't like that!"

"Well... thanks for your honesty. So? What's the plan, April?"

She put a hand to her chin and thought for a moment. "What do you think, Lina-kun?"

After all that complaining, you're asking me anyway?

"Well... personally, I'd go say hello to the Council Chairman and get the specific

details of the theft..."

"A waste of time. The interviews are finished, and greetings can wait."

"Then how about visiting the suspects' homes? if they've hidden the stolen robes there, talking to them in their own space puts on the psychological pressure. We might turn something up."

"Hmm... not bad. Let's go door-knocking, Lina-kun!"

"Yeah, yeah." I gave a half-hearted reply to her enthusiastic declaration.

"Some time ago, the Chairman had business at a nearby Association branch," April explained as we walked toward the home of Suspect Number One—Patrick, the man who craved a Gown. "He decided to wear his Gown for the first time in a while, but when he opened his closet, he realized the robe that was always hanging there was gone."

The afternoon streets were bustling with people and market stalls.

"The Chairman checked with the two Vice-Chairmen, and sure enough, their robes were missing too. None of the three had locked their rooms or their closets. We haven't been able to pinpoint the time of the crimes, which makes identifying the culprit difficult."

You might think it’s reckless not to lock up, but that’s common in a Sorcerers' Association. Why? Because many mages can use unlocking spells. In a building full of mages, a physical lock doesn't add much security. Truly important items are kept at home or in private labs; the Association offices are usually just full of miscellaneous junk.

Gowns of Title are valuable as a status symbol, but the cloth itself isn't worth much. Most people just toss them in the closet. But since this was a serial theft inside the Association, they couldn't just ignore it. Think of it like someone stealing a framed award from your office wall.

"By the way, April, does anyone else in this Association have a Gown?"

"Good question, Lina-kun." She nodded approvingly. "No one else here has one. That’s

why I was checking the mages entering town."

"So... you mean mages from out of town might be targeted too?"

"Exactly!" She beamed, happy that I was playing the "ignorant" assistant. "If the culprit's goal is a twisted act of revenge against this Association, the most effective move would be to involve an innocent traveling mage. If an outsider gets dragged into our internal mess, the Cerulean Association's reputation would be ruined. We can't leave the travelers unchecked."

"I see..." I replied vaguely. The mages who were with April earlier were likely still guarding the gates on her orders. "Speaking of which, April, you never got my answer. Do you want to see my Gown of Title?"

"Oh? Where is it?"

"I received one, but I left it at my family home."

"Your home? Where is that?"

"Zephilia. The Capital City Sorcerers' Association."

"I see, I see. And what color was the robe?"

I choked on my words. *I... like I could ever tell her! That it was bright pink! With frills!*

The design had been based on the nonsense claim that "Since she's a girl, she'll definitely want something cute," resulting in a pink, frilled monstrosity. When I received it, my sister teased me mercilessly, my parents had to fight back laughter, and I had nightmares. I ended up stuffing it in the dark depths of a storage closet. There was no way I was admitting that.

"Anyway, since I don't have it on me, I'm not in any danger." I dodged the question.

"True enough, Lina-kun." She came to a halt in front of a small house facing the main street. "Is this it?"

April nodded. "Yes. This is the home of our first suspect, Patrick."

"Patrick! It's Investigator April! I have questions! Open up!"

The moment April knocked, a loud *Crash!* echoed from deep inside the house. We stared at each other.

"...Did he just run!?"

By the time April gasped, I had already finished my incantation. "**—Vibration Bullet!**"

Shatter! My spell blew the locked doorknob clean off. We kicked the door open and charged in. We sprinted down the hallway, throwing open every door—

"Lina-kun!"

I looked into the room April had opened—a study. The large window facing the back was smashed to pieces.

"He went out the window!?" I rushed to the ledge. "He can't have gone far! Let's move!"

I leaped out into the narrow back alley. Looking left and right, I spotted a man's back as he rounded a corner.

"Found him!" I dashed after him.

"How could you... Patrick..." April panted as she caught up behind me. Her voice sounded pained. "To run away at this stage... it's as good as a confession! This ruins everything! My meticulous plan for the case to escalate into a locked-room murder, followed by my sharp deductions cornering the culprit into a tragic monologue before he takes poison...!"

"Stop wishing for the case to get worse!" I barked, delivering a back-kick into her stomach without stopping.

"Gah!?"

"Just solve the crime! You're not a detective, you're a malicious bystander!"

"You don't understand, Lina-kun! No matter how much talent a Great Detective has, if they don't encounter a difficult case, they're just a nobody! It is my right to seek a stage where I can display my genius!"

"Detectives, soldiers, and undertakers don't get that right!"

"What about thieves!?"

"That's a crime, not a job! Anyway, focus on the chase! If we lose him here, you're not a Great Detective, you're just incompetent!"

"Incom...! After him, Lina-kun!"

"I'm already moving!"

We burst out of the back alley into a slightly wider street in a residential area. There were a few pedestrians around. The man was still running ahead of us.

"There!" I yelled and sprinted. I could have caught up instantly with a Levitation spell, but using high-speed flight in a crowded street would have knocked over every bystander. I had to do it the old-fashioned way.

Luckily, he wasn't that fast. The gap closed... until suddenly, the man spun around.

"**—Vibration Bullet!**"

He fired a spell straight at us! *Crack!* The shot missed—either he was a bad aim or he was just trying to scare us—and gouged the cobblestones. People screamed and scattered.

Oh, you've done it now! Miss or not, you don't fire spells at me and get away with it!

The street was clear now thanks to the panic. I chanted under my breath— "**—Dill Brand!**"

KABOOM!

The ground heaved, and the exploding cobblestones sent the man flying through the air.

"...So it was you after all..." April said with a bitter face.

"Tch..." Patrick groaned, looking away. He was a slender, black-haired man in his late twenties.

"How could you... running away like that! You've ruined my big moment..."

"April, April. You're getting mad at the wrong thing again," I interjected.

She looked annoyed for a second but regained her composure. "So... where are the three robes?"

"...Huh? Robes?" Patrick blinked, looking confused.

"The Gowns of Title you stole from the Chairman and the others."

"Wait... hold on! Is *that* what this is about? A theft investigation!?"

"Obviously."

"Then I'm innocent! I told you before, I didn't do it!"

"Then why did you run?"

"Well... I thought... I thought you were here because I fired a couple of Vibration Bullets at Chairman Flammard's house last night to blow off some steam..."

Wow. Really?

"I don't care about that," April said.

Are you sure you shouldn't care about that, April?

"So you're saying you know nothing about the robes?"

"Nothing!"

"Hmm..." April put her hand to her chin and whispered to me. "Based on his attitude... I think he's 'white,' Lina-kun."

"I mean... maybe not 'white,' considering the whole 'shooting the Chairman's house' thing..."

"Don't lose focus, Lina-kun. We are investigating a robe theft. To expose a great evil, a detective must sometimes overlook minor transgressions."

I'm pretty sure attacking a Council member's home is a major incident... but I knew arguing wouldn't change her mind.

"Fine then, Patrick-kun. We're done here. Come, Lina-kun, to the next interview!" She turned on her heel.

"Are you... are you really just leaving it at that?"

"My Purple Brain Cells are never wrong."

They're definitely dead. I'm telling you. I swallowed my protest and followed her.

"So, the next suspect is Flagan, right? You said his Gown was revoked for a 'scandal.' What did he do?"

April frowned as we walked. "It was a shameful incident, Lina-kun. He used magic tools, astral marking, wind spells to carry sound, and spatial refraction to create realistic illusions. A man nicknamed the 'Wind Master' used his vast magical knowledge... to steal women's underwear."

"That... is genuinely pathetic."

"He was very proud of his blue Gown of Title. It’s highly possible he’s holding a grudge because it was taken away."

"You think he's going to run the moment we show up, too?"

"I certainly hope not. Hahaha."

He ran.

"What do you think, Lina-kun?"

As the sun began to set, April turned to me. After catching Flagan, it turned out he had run because he’d *also* recently returned to his life of petty underwear theft and thought he’d been caught. Once again, April dismissed him because it didn't relate to the robes.

"Honestly? My opinion is that we should just blast both of them with offensive spells and call the case closed."

"Hahaha. A funny joke."

"I'm actually being quite serious..."

"They have motives, but having met them, they both seem 'white' to me."

"I don't know. Even if they're innocent of the theft, we might as well get rid of them while we're at it..."

"No. We must solve this case first. Hmm..." April thought for a moment. "Let's call it a day. Find an inn, get some sleep, and recharge. Tomorrow, meet me in front of the Association before noon."

"Got it." I nodded, even though I felt like we were being way too laid back about this.

The next day, after a late breakfast, I strolled over to the Association. April met me with dark circles under her eyes.

"What happened? Did you not sleep?"

"Something like that. More importantly, come with me."

She led me deep into the building and stopped before a door. She knocked. "It's April."

"Enter," a man's voice called.

April opened the door to reveal a room with red carpets and a large desk. In the corner was a built-in closet. It wasn't huge, but it was a sturdy, dignified office. This was the Chairman’s office.

Behind the desk stood a man in his forties with a goatee. He looked like a perfectly ordinary middle-aged guy in a perfectly ordinary black robe. He looked average, but this was Chairman Flammard.

"Just play along, Lina-kun," April whispered so only I could hear.

"Chairman, allow me to introduce her," April said, gesturing to me. "This is the traveling mage I appointed as my assistant yesterday, Lina Inverse. Lina-kun, this is Chairman Flammard."

"Nice to meet you. I am Lina Inverse." I bowed.

The Chairman gave a dignified nod and turned to April. "You said you had news regarding the case?"

"Yes. It turns out Lina-kun here also possesses a Gown of Title. Therefore, I have a

request for the Chairman."

"And that is?"

"I want you to spread the word far and wide that the famous Lina Inverse is staying in town and that she has her Gown of Title with her."

"Wh—!?" The Chairman and I shouted at the same time.

"Wait, April-kun. Are you suggesting... a sting operation?"

April nodded. "The culprit will surely target her once they hear the rumors. And then..."

"We catch them?"

She nodded silently.

"But... will the culprit really show up for that?"

"Absolutely," she said firmly. "I stake my Purple Brain Cells on it."

Please don't stake anything on those...

"But spreading the word... if we do it too unnaturally, the culprit will realize it's a trap."

"It's simple. Lina-kun is famous among commoners and mages alike. We'll hold a small event—a signing or a handshake session—and Lina-kun will appear wearing her Gown of Title. That will get the rumors moving."

As I'd told April, I didn't have my Gown with me. But she'd told me to play along. I decided to see how she planned to pull this off.

"I see... very well. I'll see what I can do."

The Chairman sighed, and April gave a bright smile. "Thank you. We'll be on our way."

"So, April, what's the deal?" I asked the second we were behind the closed doors of her house. "I told you, my Gown is back home."

"Don't you worry about that, Lina-kun." She pulled a bundle from under her bed and set it on the table. "Open it."

I unwrapped the cloth.

"Yesterday, I used the Association's long-distance communication room to contact the Zephilia Association. They still had the detailed design on file—it was a lifesaver. You might not know this, but I'm quite skilled at sewing. I stayed up all night to reproduce it as faithfully as possible."

April’s voice seemed to fade into the distance...

I stared, utterly speechless, at the object that emerged from the bundle: a bright, gaudy pink robe, covered in frills.

(To be continued in April’s Case Files Part 2)

Next Episode Preview

The cursed past I should have sealed away—the nightmare I thought I had left at the end of time—namely, will I, Lina, have to wear that **gaudy pink robe** again!?

Will I choose to solve the case, or will I choose my pride!?

I mean, even if I throw my pride away, can April actually solve the case in the first place!?

And who is the culprit!? Well, there’s a theory that at this point it could be anyone, but let’s set that aside! Anyway, I'd be happy—or maybe I wouldn't—if you’d stick around for the conclusion of "April’s Case Files"!

April’s Case Files (Part 2)

Synopsis

The incident at the Cerulean City Mages' Association was the theft of the ceremonial robes belonging to Council Chairman Flammard and his two Vice-Chairmen!

Passing through town, I ended up working on the investigation as an assistant to Investigator April!

The suspects were two incredibly shady men: Patrick and Flagan.

However, the investigation lacked a decisive lead, so April finally decided on a sting operation!

And now! Right before my eyes, a gaudy pink robe was prepared!

The world was wrapped in silence.

A quiet—a very quiet night.

Even the bustle of the tavern on the first floor of the inn had died down; the only thing I could hear was the occasional sound of the wind brushing past the window.

Alright! Now’s my chance!

I slung my pack over my shoulder and crept toward the window, silencing my footsteps.

I whispered a Levitation spell under my breath, gently pushed the window open, and just as I was about to—

"Pfft!?"

I choked mid-spell and nearly lost it.

Right there, on the other side of the window, framed against the moon in the sky, stood April!

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you escape, Lina-kun," she said in her usual tone, floating right outside the second-story window.

"...Wh... Why!?"

"Hmph. Simple deduction, Lina-kun. At first, you were so disgusted by the idea of wearing the ceremonial robe, yet while I was persuading you, you suddenly pulled a complete about-face and agreed. In that moment, my 'purple brain cells' spoke to me: 'This is a trick. She intends to pretend to agree, wait for me to let my guard down, and then seize the opening to run away.'"

She spoke eloquently, strike a pose with her right hand on her chin and her left hand supporting her elbow.

"You are a clever person. You would consider the possibility that I might realize your intent. In that case, you wouldn't escape through the entrance where there might be guards, but through the window—likely using a Levitation spell or something similar. That was my deduction."

...D... Damn you! Why do you have to be so sharp in all the wrong places!

"Since I cannot use Levitation myself, I suspended myself from the roof of the inn with a rope and kept watch, thus preventing your flight."

...Ah. She was right. There was a rope tied around her waist.

.....

...Which meant...

I snapped my right hand up and gave April a little wave.

"Then that means if I just walk out the front door normally, everything's fine. See ya! ♪"

".....

Wait—! D-D-D-Darn it! Wait, Lina-ku—"

Slam.

I shut the window, locked it, and skipped right out the door.

The inn was four stories high, so it would take her a while to climb back to the roof and get down.

With a leisurely pace, I walked down to the first floor, opened the front door, and—

"...I suppose I was a bit too naive, Lina-kun."

"WHAAAAA!?"

I couldn't help but scream at the sight of April standing right there.

It wasn't just because it was unexpected. She was covered in dirt from head to toe, and to top it off, blood was streaming from her forehead.

"—Hey...! Hey, you!?"

"...Hmph. It was simple, Lina-kun. I merely used the knife I had to cut the rope and get ahead of you... I failed the landing... so it... hurts... a bit... Ack."

Mid-sentence, she suddenly went limp and collapsed face-first.

"Hey!! Wake up!"

I rushed over to her in a panic.

"No, I am truly glad you understand, Lina-kun."

"Heh heh heh. It’s not like I actually 'understand' anything."

I directed those words at a beaming April, my gaze sharp enough to kill.

—A few days after the escape drama at the inn—

The day had finally arrived.

Namely—

The Lina Inverse Autograph Session, sponsored by the Cerulean City Mages' Association!

And of course, what I was wearing... was that pink monstrosity!

...N...

NOOOOOOOOOO!

Naturally, I hated it from the bottom of my soul. I tried to run away.

However—April had blocked me with a near-suicidal desperation.

—I could have tried to flee again, of course, but if I had, April would surely have tried to stop me with the same reckless disregard for her own life.

...If April had fallen to her death because I tried to run, I’d have nightmares every night.

Since I really didn't want that on my conscience, I had no choice but to behave.

...But...

Because of that, I had to wear a pink robe and appear in public!

As I sat in a back room of the Association, muttering to myself—

Grab! April suddenly put me in a full nelson from behind!

"It looks like a good crowd has gathered at the venue. Now then, shall we get you changed, Lina-kun?"

"NOOOOOOOOO!"

"Kukukuku. It’s too late, Lina-kun. Just be a good girl. You have nowhere left to run."

"What do you think you're doing cornering me!? If you're going to corner someone, corner the culprit!!"

—My screams of protest echoed uselessly throughout the halls of the Association.

"—Hey, hey, look at that."

"What is that? Ugh, gross... Does she think she looks cute just because it’s pink? Talk about zero taste."

"I wonder what it is? There’s a crowd. Maybe a strip club?"

"No way. Not with someone that flat and sexless."

Giggle, giggle, hahahaha!♪

.....

Snap, snap, snap!

Hearing the sound of blood vessels in my brain popping by the gross, I immediately began the incantation for the **Dragon Slave**!

"Whoa! Calm down, Lina-kun!"

"Please, anything but attack spells!"

April and the staff members rushed in to stop me.

...Huff... huff!

I managed to steady my breathing and, with iron self-restraint, aborted the spell.

—The "Passersby 1 through 3," who had just uttered those loud-mouthed insults, had taken up positions a short distance away and were staring in this direction with eyes full of curiosity.

...Grrr! It’s not like I’m dressed like this because I want to! I won't forgive them for spitting out such insensitive remarks without knowing how I feel!

I couldn't lay a hand on them here, but they shouldn't assume every night will have a bright moon! Actually, even if the moon is bright, if I catch them, they're dead!

"...A-Ahem. Well then... we will now begin the Lina Inverse autograph session, sponsored by the Cerulean City Mages' Association."

Ignoring my fury, the mage acting as the MC declared the start of the event.

...Clap, clap, clap... A few scattered cheers broke out.

To be honest, this was purely an event to lure out the culprit. I thought nobody would show up, but for some reason, quite a few people had gathered.

Part of it was likely curiosity, but even before the session started, there were already more than ten people in line.

Could it be... that I’m actually... kind of popular!?

"...Nice to meet you..."

"Ah, yes, hello!♪"

Flipping on my business smile for the middle-aged guy at the front of the line—who had his face and body hidden by a cloak and hood—I took my quill to the parchment—

...Hm?

The moment I felt that presence!

"DIE, LINA INVERSE!!"

With a roar, the man in front of me lunged with a knife in hand!

But! I dodged with room to spare and squared off against him.

"—What do you think you're doing!?" I demanded.

Naturally, his target wasn't my ceremonial robe. If it were, he wouldn't have charged in with such blatant bloodlust.

"You know why!"

With that, the man ripped off his cloak and hood!

Underneath appeared the face of a thug in his late twenties!

"Don't tell me you've forgotten! This face!"

"There's no way I could forget! I never remembered it to begin with!" I declared flatly.

He was probably a remnant of some bandit gang I'd crushed, but there was no way I could remember the face of every single one of those losers.

"...Y-You...! Mocking me...!"

As he roared and lunged again, I dodged him easily. I began chanting a spell under my breath—

—!

In that instant, an idea struck me, and I delayed the release of the spell.

"—Damn it! Stop moving around!"

I circled around the shouting man—

Alright! Right here!

"**Fire Arrow!**"

Fwoooom!

"GYAAAAAAAHH!?"

Hit directly by my dozen or so fire arrows, the attacking man—and, unfortunately, several people who just happened to be standing behind him (the ones who called me tasteless and sexless)—screamed and went tumbling.

"Wait a minute, Lina-kun, didn't you just target the people in the back!?"

"...Hmph... 'unfortunate accidents' are truly terrifying, aren't they?"

I ignored April's whispered protest and spoke up.

"This is all the fault of this man who attacked me so suddenly!"

"...Well, but..."

"—Or—"

I lowered my voice as I turned to April, who was still trying to say something.

"—are you saying that at this event you proposed and the Association hosted, I purposely involved innocent bystanders? ...If that's the case, I'm sure someone other than me would be held responsible, too."

"...Urk...!"

She gave a small groan—then cleared her throat.

"...W-Well, these kinds of unfortunate accidents do happen in this world. It’s nobody's fault, really."

"I completely agree."

I nodded vigorously.

As the Association staff dragged the fallen man away, April cleared her throat again and addressed the crowd.

"...There has been an unfortunate accident, but there is no need for concern. The villain has been successfully subdued. Now, let us regain our composure and continue the autograph session. Next person, please."

Prompted, the second man stepped forward and—

"Lina Inverse, prepare yourself!"

"Again!? **Vibration Blast!**"

Boom!

And so—the second person also ended up rolling across the cobblestones.

"—To put it simply—it seems the plan was a failure."

Two days after the autograph session, around noon.

The moment we met in the dining room on the first floor of the inn, April said those words in a perfectly calm tone.

"—Don't say it so casually!!"

WHAM!

"Guegh!?"

Accompanied by my scream, my corkscrew punch caught April square in the face.

The other customers were looking over with slightly terrified eyes, but that was a trivial matter.

"...W-What was that for, Lina-kun!?"

"Shut up!"

As April picked herself up, I glared at her with arched brows.

"Don't you 'it was a failure' me after making me do something so incredibly embarrassing! Besides, even with that autograph session, more than half the people in line were thugs who held a grudge against me... The people who actually took my autograph home were less than half... What kind of autograph session is that!?"

"—That’s where you're wrong, Lina-kun."

"How am I wrong?" I asked sullenly.

She looked at me with a serious gaze.

"In the last two days, a massive number of those parchments you signed have been found nailed to trees on the outskirts of town or dumped in trash heaps. In other words, according to my sharp deduction, the vast majority of people who got an autograph were just there for the novelty, and only a few people actually took your autograph home..."

"THAT’S EVEN WORSE!!"

K-POW!

"Megyuh!?"

My punch sent her crawling on the floor again.

"...W-Why are you so angry...?"

"How could I not be angry!?"

I roared, then lowered my voice slightly.

"...I did exactly what you said and played along with that autograph session... and it’s been two days since then! Even staying at this inn, there hasn't been a single sign of the culprit coming after the ceremonial robe I’m holding! This means I was basically just put on display for nothing!"

"...It is indeed strange..."

Sitting back down in her chair, April crossed her arms.

"...There shouldn't be any flaw in the plan derived by my purple brain cells..."

"...I wonder about that..."

...Personally, I couldn't help but feel that the mistake was me believing a single word this woman said...

"—Or perhaps—could it be that they realized it was a trap!?"

".....Hey."

My eyes went flat at April's words.

"...Uh... Excuse me, April."

"What is it, Lina-kun?"

"...I really hope I'm wrong... but you weren't actually thinking they wouldn't realize it was a trap, were you...?"

"...Eh...?"

"I mean... in the middle of an investigation into a robe theft, the Mages' Association suddenly hosts an autograph session where a passing mage goes out of her way to wear a ceremonial robe... No matter how you look at it, that's basically saying, 'Steal this if you can!'"

"...H-Hmm... I suppose one could look at it that way."

"...I'd say that's the only way to look at it. If the culprit is the type to say, 'Alright, I accept that challenge!' they might show up... but if they're the type to say, 'I'm not falling for that provocation,' then of course they won't appear... ...Wait, don't tell me... you actually didn't think that far ahead?"

"Hahaha. Your eyes are scary, Lina-kun. Well, you see, how should I put it..."

...As I thought... she hadn't thought about it at all...

...Wait... that means, I can't believe it, but—

"...Say, April... just asking, but did you tell anyone I was staying at this inn?"

"Of course not." She puffed out her chest. "I wouldn't tell anyone. I myself am extremely careful about being followed when I come here. In fact, just now, I felt like

someone was tailing me, so I made sure to lose them before I arrived."

"YOU IDIOT! Why would you keep it a secret!? There's no point in being bait otherwise! If the culprit doesn't know where I am, there's no way they'll show up! In a situation like this, you're supposed to 'casually' mention my location to various people or pretend not to notice you're being followed!"

"I see... that is another way of looking at it..."

"It’s the only way!"

"...M-Mmm... But at this rate, it’s hard to tell who is the detective and who is the assistant..."

As she spoke, I gave her a sweet smile.

"...By the way, April. After making me dress up in that humiliating outfit and putting me on display, if the culprit isn't caught after all this, where do you think my anger is going to go? ...Oh, by the way, you saw my attack magic two days ago, right? Just so you know, that was only about half power."

"I-I-I-I understand, Lina-kun! I was just thinking it was about time for me to get serious!"

"Heh heh heh. If you can get serious, do it from the start. If you value your life."

"Hahaha. U-Understood, Lina-kun. Then I'll head back to the Association immediately and start spreading the word about your location."

She stood up the moment she finished speaking.

"Make sure it’s 'casual'! You hear me!?"

...As she scurried away as if running for her life, I wondered if it was just my imagination that if I left everything to April, even a solvable case would never be solved.

At this rate, I’d have to stop playing the "detective's assistant" and start moving seriously, or I’d be stuck in this town forever.

—That said—

It was also true that unless the culprit made a move, the situation wouldn't progress—

Suddenly—I was wide awake.

It was that night, in my room at the inn.

I felt it. Carried on the night air was a sensation like a single thread of cold—

Namely—bloodlust.

The instant I reflexively leaped out of bed—

BOOM!

The wall beside the bed was pulverized with a roar!

An attack spell!? Likely—a Vibration Blast!

—Wait! Speaking of Vibration Blast—!

First things first, I grabbed my cloak and threw it on while chanting a spell under my breath.

CRASH!

A second spell tore another massive hole in the wall.

At the same time, I poked my head out of the first hole and released the spell I had been chanting!

"**Lighting!**"

Flash!

"Gwah!?"

The man's scream echoed in the dark night; he must have looked directly at the sudden light.

I, of course, hadn't looked at it—but illuminated by that light, standing on the street below, was a thin-faced man with black hair: Suspect Number One, Patrick!

So it was him!

I began my next incantation—

"**Raywing!**"

I took to the night sky with the high-speed flight spell!

"—Tch!"

Patrick hurriedly began to run. But I had no intention of letting him escape!

I poured my will into it and increased my speed!

Before he had gone very far, Patrick suddenly skidded to a halt, spun around, and thrust his right hand toward me!

He had likely fired an attack spell—but!

Thud!

A small impact hit me for a moment, and my flight path wavered slightly—but that was it.

The spell I was using wrapped the caster in a barrier of wind for high-speed flight. Patrick’s attack spell had been easily deflected by that wind barrier.

Patrick’s face filled with shock.

And then—

WHAM!

Still wrapped in my barrier, I delivered a full-body tackle!

"...Ugh... gack..."

"Hmph. Looks like you're awake."

With his hands and feet tied, I looked down at the rolling Patrick with my arms crossed.

"...Ugh! You...!"

"Heh heh heh... your luck ran out the moment you picked a fight with me. Now that it’s come to this, there’s no way out! Now! Start talking! Where did you hide the three ceremonial robes!?"

"...Huh?"

Patrick let out a dumbfounded sound at my declaration.

"What are you talking about...? I told you before! I have nothing to do with the robe thefts!"

"Liar!! Then why did you fire an attack spell into the room where I was sleeping!?"

"Because at the autograph session two days ago, one of the attack spells you fired hit my house directly!!"

"............?"

Hearing him state that so clearly and flatly, I was momentarily speechless.

...Now that he mentioned it... I think his house was on the main street... near the square...

I did have a feeling that during the autograph session, one of my stray attack spells might have demolished some private house...

Wait, snap out of it! If I show weakness here, I lose!

I puffed out my chest and stood my ground.

"You should put a limit on your petty grudges! April was the one who planned the event, so if you're going to resent someone, resent her!"

"Whoa. Don't just casually say something so unreasonable."

"Shut up! A little while ago, you fired a Vibration Blast into the Chairman’s house for a 'tiny' reason like 'not getting a ceremonial robe'! In other words, you're the type of person who fires attack spells at people’s houses for the smallest things! Conversely! That means the fact that I demolished your house is also a 'tiny' thing!"

"No it isn't! And in the first place! The reason I fired an attack spell into the Chairman’s house wasn't because I didn't get a ceremonial robe!"

"Oh? Then what was the reason? Let's hear it."

"...That is..."

When I asked, he looked away as if it were hard to talk about.

"...Hmph. As I thought, just a load of—"

"No! He... he stole my precious woman from me!"

"...Eh!? That’s a bit heavy all of a sudden...!"

"...Jessica... my lover... was a sweet, honest, and lovely girl... But then! The Chairman saw her and told her he'd buy her a house and anything else she wanted, and she was deceived by those words...!"

"...Um... wouldn't you normally call a person like that a 'selfish, stupid girl who is easily swayed by material things'?"

"She was a beauty, so it’s fine!"

"Ah. I see."

...Seriously... men are always like this... wait...

"—Wait a minute. Doesn't the Chairman have a wife or something?"

"He does! In other words, it’s an affair! Do you think this can be forgiven!?"

"Hmm. I don't care about the stupid girl, but you're right, that's unforgivable... wait, when did this happen?"

"The Chairman seduced her about a month ago! The house was finished about half a month ago... Argh! It makes me so mad!"

"...I see, I see... and now this Jessica is living in that house, and the Chairman visits sometimes...?"

"...Yeah..." Patrick answered grumpily.

...Hmm... I wonder...

"—Hey, Patrick. You hate being suspected of being the thief, don't you?"

"Of course. Who’d be happy about that?"

"Then can you give me a hand? Maybe—everything will work out fine."

Slam!

The moment I threw open the door, the two people inside stood up from their chairs.

Namely—Council Chairman Flammard and April.

"...What is the meaning of this, Lina-kun?"

April asked with a frown as she looked at us.

"Us"—that is, me, Suspect Number One Patrick, and the scrawny middle-aged man, Suspect Number Two Flagan. Three of us in total.

We were in a room at the Mages' Association. I had sent word to April and the Chairman to wait here, saying I had something to discuss regarding the case.

...Well, the detective's assistant and the two primary suspects had arrived together. I could understand April’s confusion, but—

"What do you mean, 'what's the meaning'? It means this."

With that, I dumped the contents of the cloth bag I was holding onto the table in the center of the room.

"—T-This is!?" The Chairman let out a cry of shock.

"The ceremonial robes!?"

—Yes.

Scattered across the table were three colored pieces of cloth—the ceremonial robes that were supposed to have been stolen!

"How did you find them!? —Wait." April looked at me. "Lina-kun, you were the culprit!?"

"How does it even work that way!? ...Don't you see what finding these means? Right, Council Chairman Flammard?"

"...Urk...!"

Upon my words, the Chairman collapsed to his knees on the spot.

"...Eh!? What on earth...!?" There was one person who still didn't understand the situation.

"It means, April, that Council Chairman Flammard is the culprit behind the whole thing."

"...What...!"

I repeated the explanation I had given to Patrick and Flagan earlier.

"I think it’s a pretty common pattern. Basically, the Chairman was having an affair and boastfully showed off his ceremonial robe to his partner."

"...Ugh..."

The Chairman, still hunched over, let out a small groan as if I'd hit a sore spot.

"But then! Whether it was out of jealousy toward his wife or just a prank, the partner hid the robe! This is where the Chairman panicked. If the robe were missing, there would be questions about where he lost it, and the affair might be exposed! So, he thought it would be better if it were 'stolen'! Thinking short-term, the Chairman stole the robes of the other two and fabricated a 'robe theft incident'! ...I had Flagan sneak into the Chairman’s study and his mistress's house, and we found these robes. This is the smoking gun!"

At my words, the Chairman looked up from the floor with an expression of agony.

"...Urk...! But how...! Since when... why did you suspect me...!?"

"Hmph. From the beginning. The reason is simple!"

I pointed a finger straight at April.

"The moment you appointed an investigator who looks like her brain is filled with blueberry jam instead of gray matter, it was obvious you had no intention of actually solving it!"

"HOW RUDE!!"

"Wait a minute, you guys!"

"...It is true... that I felt it would be bad to appoint someone sharp-witted who might reach the truth..."

Ignoring April's protest, the Chairman spoke while slumped in defeat.

"...But I never thought it would lead to this..."

"...Well... I guess you could call it 'reaping what you sow.'"

With that, I snapped my fingers.

Responding to the signal, two mages appeared from behind the door and took the Chairman by the arms.

—I had already spoken to the two Vice-Chairmen and had people stationed.

Whether they'd turn him over to the officials was up to the Vice-Chairmen, but Flammard would likely lose his position.

"Well now. Patrick, Flagan, you were a big help."

"It was nothing."

"No need for thanks."

As the two of them puffed out their chests, I gave them a sweet smile and snapped my fingers again.

More mages appeared.

"...While I appreciate the help... turn these two over to the authorities for property damage, breaking and entering, and theft."

"HEY, WAIT A MINUTE!!"

"That’s not fair! That’s not fair at all!"

Complaining loudly, the two were dragged away by the mages.

And so—

Only April and I were left in the room.

"—So, the case is successfully closed. ...Which means, April, I’ll take my reward now."

"W-Wait a minute, Lina-kun! I only hired you as a detective's assistant...!"

"This case! It just wasn't big enough for someone like you to handle personally," I cut her off, following up with a bit of flattery.

If she got in a bad mood and said "no fee," everything would be ruined.

"It wasn't worth the trouble of April herself stepping in, so I, as the assistant, just handled it quickly."

"...B-But for saying that, you said something about blueberry brains earlier..."

"That just means your thinking is flexible! —The world is full of far more complex and bizarre cases. Your intellect exists specifically to face those kinds of things!"

"...Do you really think so...?"

Alright! She’s buying it! One more push!

"I do! That's why simple cases like this should be left to an assistant! So, what I did was undeniably my job as your assistant!"

"Now that you mention it... I feel like that might be true..."

"Right? —So, the reward."

"Alright! Just you wait!"

Perfectly cheered up, April left the room.

...Whew... I’m glad she’s so simple...

Before long—

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Lina-kun!"

"Yay! Reward time!"

"I asked the accounting department, but they wouldn't release the funds."

.....

I felt like I'd just been told something incredibly momentous in a very casual way, and for a moment, I was silent.

"...Uh... what did you... just say...?"

"Well, according to the person in accounting, they can't release funds without a proper prior contract. It's really a shame."

"...But... didn't you say at the start... that twenty gold coins was a sure thing...?"

"Yes. According to my deduction, I was sure that about twenty gold coins would be released..."

"IT WAS JUST A BLIND GUESS!?"

CRASH!

"Aaaah! Lina-kun, why are you suddenly going on a rampage!?"

"SHUT UP!!"

—And so—

This cursed incident, which left me thoroughly humiliated and without a reward, came to a close along with the destruction of the Cerulean City Mages' Association reception room.

—Damn it all.

(April's Case Files: The End)

Pride of Darkness (Part 1)

"——It’s quiet, isn't it? Uncannily so——"

The words I muttered dissolved into the night air.

Through the gaps in the lush foliage, a sky full of stars was visible.

...Pop...

The campfire made a small cracking sound as it sparked—that was just about the only thing I could hear.

".....True enough.....

It’s strange that we can't even hear the sound of insects or night birds."

Across the campfire, my traveling companion—or rather, the "goldfish poop" following me, the parasite, my eternal nuisance, Naga the White Serpent—nodded with a serious face.

...Our plan was to start the real work tomorrow morning, but at this rate, it looked like the schedule was going to be moved up a bit.

".....I didn't think they'd come all the way out here to greet us....."

I turned my gaze toward the darkness, and there—

There it was.

Naga and I had arrived in town around noon that day.

It wasn't a small town, but it was draped in a desolate, gloomy atmosphere.

We were in a nearly empty eatery, eating a meal prepared by a somber old man and served by a somber waitress, when—

".....Forgive me for interrupting your meal so suddenly, but....."

I turned toward the voice and saw a gloomy-looking old man standing there.

“.....Yes.....?”

Naga and I froze, forks mid-air as we both stabbed at the same piece of roast meat,

and spoke in unison.

".....I am the mayor of this town.....

You two... appear to be mages, if I am not mistaken....."

".....Well... I suppose we are....."

As I spoke, I used the knife in my right hand to carve off the section of roast meat where my fork was planted, making sure my piece was larger.

"We're mages—what do you want?"

While I said that, Naga's knife skillfully sliced away most of the meat I was aiming for, leaving me with a tiny scrap.

—She's actually pretty good!

".....The truth is.....

I know it is a lot to ask, but there is something I would like to request of you....."

But I used my knife to skewer the large piece that had been cut away and forcefully dragged it onto my own plate!

A look of bitter regret flashed in Naga's eyes.

".....Urk...! You're actually quite good, Lina! But that was a breach of etiquette!"

"Ho ho ho. I think sticking two forks into one piece of meat is already a major breach of etiquette..... but if I worried about every little thing like that, I'd never be able to share a table with you!"

Our eyes met for a moment, sparks flying—

".....Ahhhhh..... Just as I thought....."

A sigh flowed out of the old man. A tragic groan that sounded like his soul was being ripped apart, causing the temperature of the room to drop instantly.

The mayor slumped over by our table.

".....Young people never listen to the words of a dying old man like me..... Even though they call me 'Mayor,' in the end, it's just a title to shove all the troublesome problems onto.....

.....My life.....

.....What was the point of it all, I wonder....."

"......Um.....?"

"Hello.....?"

Unable to bear his gloominess, Naga and I stopped eating and spoke to him.

"......Er... it seems you have something to discuss.....?"

We could have ignored him, but having an old man groan at the side of the table made it hard to enjoy the food. If it were some young guy or girl, I could just blast them away with a "Shut up!", but since he was a frail old man, I'd be in a real spot if he just keeled over and died from the shock.

At my call, the mayor turned a damp, heavy gaze toward us.

"......Will you listen to my story.....?"

"Hmph. It seems we won't be able to finish our meal in peace unless we do. Fine. This Naga the White Serpent and 'one other' will listen to what you have to say, Mr. Gloomy Mayor."

"'Gloomy' is a bit harsh... Why is it that young people these days are so insensitive to others' faces....."

"THAT'S THE GLOOMY PART!!"

I immediately snapped at the mayor as he began muttering again.

"......So? Anyway, you have something to tell us, right?"

"......Oh... yes, yes.....

.....Actually.....

It was about a month ago.....

Someone who went hunting in the western mountains found a massive castle there.....

That was how it all began....."

"A castle.....?"

I found myself parroting his words.

The mayor gave a slow, deep nod.

"That person had passed through the same area two or three days prior... and of course, there was no such thing there then. Within just a few days, a castle suddenly appeared."

...Wait... "within a few days"...

I didn't know the scale of the building, but if he called it a "castle," it had to be of a certain size. Building something like that in just a few days is absolutely impossible.

—Normally.

".....The hunter returned to town and told everyone this story.

——Of course, no one believed him.

.....Until the vampires appeared in town....."

“VAMPIRES!?”

Naga and I cried out at the same time.

—Vampires—

There’s no need to say much about them; they’re incredibly famous.

Undead beings who continue to live—or rather, exist—by drinking human blood.

They possess nearly eternal life and endless regenerative powers. They have strength and magical power far exceeding that of humans—

And yet, they have a laundry list of childish weaknesses: sunlight is bad, they hate garlic, they’re weak to crosses, and they can't cross running water.

I can never tell if they’re supposed to be strong or just physically frail.

And the most defining characteristic—the greatest terror they inspire—is that those who die from their blood-sucking return as vampires themselves.

...Well, to Naga and me, they’re just small fries.

But to normal people, they are undoubtedly the stuff of nightmares.

".....Then... is the reason this town is so uncannily desolate because.....?"

At my question, the mayor nodded slowly.

".....Many townspeople, fearing harm from the vampires, abandoned the town early on and fled.....

.....The vampires occasionally appear in groups, parading through the town as if to mock us.....

.....They are... enjoying tormenting us.....

.....So far, there hasn't been any actual damage to speak of, but... once they grow tired of watching us tremble....."

"——The real slaughter begins——right?"

At Naga's casual remark, the mayor's body gave a small, violent shiver.

".....Likely.....

——Naturally, we sent a petition to the Lord.

But there has been no sign of the army coming to subjugate them.

.....We don't have time to rely on an army that may never come. We don't know when the vampires might attack on a whim.....

.....So, er.....

My request to you is... none other than... er....."

The mayor muttered hesitantly.

—But—he didn't need to finish.

When it comes to vampires, they might have a hoard of treasure, and more importantly, after hearing such a heavy story, I'd have a bad conscience if I ignored it.

"——Just so you know——"

I said, giving the mayor a wink.

"The fee for exterminating vampires is quite high."

"——Two ladies camping out in a place like this..... isn't it a bit dangerous?"

Slowly, Naga and I stood up to face the man.

He was a tall man, appearing to be about twenty years old, dressed in black clothes and a cloak.

He had a face that could be called handsome, with soft blonde hair.

But his eyes, the same color as blood, told the story of his true identity.

——A Vampire——

".....I see.....

So a dangerous guy like you is wandering around, huh."

"Calling me dangerous——how hurtful," he said in an utterly pretentious tone.

"Hmph. You seem quite confident."

Naga puffed out her chest, stepped forward, and pointed a finger sharply at him.

"HOWEEEEEVER! Now that Naga the White Serpent is here, your days are numbered! I don't know what you're plotting, but consider this the end of the line for you!"

She declared loudly.

And then—

".....Fu.....

Fuhahahahahahaha!"

The vampire's laughter echoed through the night sky.

".....No... excuse me.....

It seems there has been a great misunderstanding, so I couldn't help myself.....

To think you don't even know what we are doing here.....

——Fine! Then allow me to tell you!

Our noble purpose!"

With that, he flourished his cloak with a snap!

Like a monstrous bird taking flight in the night.

"Though we were once human, we vampires are existences that far transcend humanity! In other words, it is no exaggeration to say we are a superior race to humans!"

...I see... the "inferior races must submit or die" talk, then...

In the darkness, the man continued his grand speech.

"BUT! Should such a superior race stoop to vulgar behavior!? The answer is, of course, no! While looking down on humans, our pride cannot allow us to be called 'monsters'

or 'abominations' by those very humans!

THEREFORE!

We are training in this land to master the etiquette of gentlemen and ladies befitting a superior race!"

“.....Huh.....?”

Naga and I muttered simultaneously.

The vampire continued, heedless.

"The name is the Vampire High Society Club!

.....Oh. Forgive my late introduction.

I am Alexandre Nicholson, from Sales.

.....It is a fact that many traditional vampires, while calling themselves 'Nobles of the Night,' were sorely lacking in manners. At this rate, no matter how grand our words, humans will never recognize our true nature.

THEREFORE!

At our Society Club, through education and training in etiquette worthy of the name 'Noble,' vampires who were once called 'ferocious brats' undergo a complete transformation into stunning gentlemeeeen.

With 'The Open Vampire' as our motto, we continue our activities day and night, hoping for co-existence and mutual prosperity with humans in the future!"

".....I see....."

I gave a vague response, my brow furrowed.

...I mean... an "Open Vampire"... what even is that...

".....Er, so in other words.....

You have no intention of doing anything bad to the nearby town.....?"

At my question, Alex flashed an unnecessarily bright smile.

"Hahahaha. Of course not.

.....Though, even if I say so myself, you probably won't believe me..... so how about it? Why don't you come with me and see our activities for yourself?"

“.....”

Naga and I exchanged a silent look.

Of course, there was a high possibility it was a trap to lure us in—

But if it was, we’d just have to smash the trap!

"Fine. We'll accept your invitation."

I nodded.

——It was indeed something that deserved to be called a "castle."

Spired towers lining a massive building. A design with high roofs.

——The only decisive differences from a normal castle were the strange lack of a human presence and the way it was built as if hiding between two mountains.

"——Please. This way."

Alex pushed lightly, and the massive, heavy-looking front door opened inward with ease.

Beyond it was an entrance hall brightly lit by magical light.

".....Huh..... It’s actually quite a decent place."

As I muttered this while stepping through the door, Alex smiled warmly.

"Hahahaha. I am honored that it pleases you. After all, it took nearly ten days to build this place."

"Ten days?" I asked back instinctively.

The mayor had said "a few days," hadn't he...?

"Yes. For the building itself, we first drew up the blueprints——once that was done, it was just a matter of interfering with the earth spirits using magical power according to the plans, so it was finished in about two nights——"

I see. He had applied the techniques used for creating stone golems. With the magical power of vampires, which far exceeds that of humans, building a castle of this size in two nights was possible.

"——Well, the interior decoration after that was quite a chore. After all, that isn't something magic can easily solve. And since we can only go out at night, it was quite

a struggle. Honestly."

"You certainly go through a lot of trouble," Naga said in a tone that made it sound like someone else's problem.

The spacious entrance hall, though empty of people, had high ceilings and was furnished with carpets, chandeliers, and other decor.

"Hahahaha. Well, not that much.

——Now, let me introduce our instructor."

Alex clapped his hands twice, Clap! Clap!

"Mariatherese-san! Mariatherese-san!"

The echo of the clapping and his voice rang through the hall, and as it faded—

"——Did you call for me? Alexandre-sama."

A woman appeared, opening the door at the front of the hall.

She also appeared to be around twenty. A beauty with silver hair, dressed in a chic black dress.

...Her eyes were red, though...

She walked toward us with graceful steps, pinched the hem of her dress, and gave a small bow.

"Nice to meet you. I am Mariatherese Heinlein, the instructor for this Society Club."

".....Ah... I'm Lina."

"I'm Naga."

We were led into introducing ourselves.

"Mariatherese-san. These ladies are interested in a facility tour. As you can see, they are human. I would like you to provide a tour and explain our activities."

"With pleasure. ——Now, Naga-san, Lina-kun, please come this way."

She elegantly turned on her heel and began to walk with dainty steps.

Naga and I had no choice but to follow.

"——Please, take your time," Alex's voice called from behind us.

"——Have you already heard the purpose of our High Society Club?" Maria asked as we

walked.

I answered vaguely.

".....Something about vampires living a high-society life and co-existing with humans....."

"That is exactly right."

She looked back over her shoulder and smiled sweetly.

"We find it quite distasteful to be called a 'type of monster.' So, we are starting with an image change. ...But this name of ours... 'Vampire'... I simply don't like it. It doesn't feel 'high-so' at all. Especially the 'vam' part. 'Vam,' you see, 'Vam.' Don't you think it sounds more barbaric than high-society? If possible, I wish we had a name with a more high-society feel. Like Francois, or Alfonso..... What do you two think?"

".....Er....."

"Well....."

We both hesitated, caught off guard by the sudden question.

...I mean... even if you ask us what we think...

For starters, I definitely wouldn't want the name of a race that drinks human blood to be "Francois." Seriously. "The Francois who attacks the town night after night" or "So-and-so's daughter had her blood sucked by a Francois"... it just feels wrong...

Still, there was no point in picking a fight right now.

".....Well, it’s true that the word 'Vampire' doesn't have a very good image....." I gave a safe answer.

"Doesn't it? ——Ah. Anyway, this is our training course."

With that, she opened a nearby door with an elegant, high-society gesture.

The training area she showed us was, well, incredibly normal.

Practicing speech, correct pronunciation, dressing in western clothes, et cetera, et cetera...

In the area where they practiced walking with books on their heads, a student was being scolded: "You mustn't use telekinesis to fix a falling book!" That was about the only thing that felt a little "different."

".....All the dresses are black."

After we had finished looking around the training area, Naga muttered this. Maria nodded.

"Yes, that is correct. We see many wealthy humans who proudly wear jewels, gold, and silver just to show off and act important, but....."

"Hmph. I see. You mean to say that true nobility is something that emanates from within."

At Naga's words, Maria beamed with a wide smile.

"Yes! Exactly! You understand perfectly! And black is the color that most vividly brings out one's true essence! .....Does that mean the reason your outfit is black is also....."

"Of course! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"My! Oho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Led by Naga, Maria also pulled a feather fan out of nowhere, covered her mouth, and laughed loudly.

"——Hmph. Your laugh is quite good as well!"

"Oh, Naga-san, please."

...Ugh... they're actually hitting it off... these two...

But... would this woman really call the thing Naga is wearing—which is less of an "outfit" and more like "strange scraps of cloth"—an "item of clothing"? I mean, no matter how much she tries to maintain high-society speech...

——But——no matter what they say, they are still vampires.

I hated to break up their bonding, but there was something I had to ask clearly.

"——By the way, Maria-san——"

"Oh, that won't do, Lina-san."

She cut me off with a slight frown.

"In high-society settings, it is a breach of etiquette to arbitrarily shorten someone's name. Please call me Mariatherese."

".....F... Fine..... Anyway... I wanted to ask..... I heard that you occasionally go out

to the nearby town in a group at night..... what exactly is the purpose of that?"

"Oh. That is a project to combine practical training with deepening our friendship with the townspeople. We mean no harm. We are calling out for everyone to get along..... but they don't seem to understand....."

...I see... from the townspeople's perspective, even if a group of vampires tells them "We mean no harm, let’s get along," they’d probably think they were just being mocked.

——However——

"And one more thing——"

The most—important question remained.

"How do you all... handle your meals?"

Her movement froze at the question that struck at their very nature—

Or so I thought.

"Yes. Twice, at dusk and before dawn. We make an effort to have regular meals."

She said it quite casually.

"Our staple food is mostly salad. .....Traditional vampires are famous for biting into a person's neck to suck their blood..... but biting into someone's neck isn't high-society at all! Oh, how dreadful! The point is simply to ingest life force, so raw vegetable salads or sashimi made of meat and fish are perfectly sufficient."

...Is that how it works...? Hey...

Then what was the point of all those people in history who had their blood sucked by vampires...?

"Well, it is true that the taste of blood suits our preferences best..... but for now, if you dissolve salt and iron filings into warmed tomato juice, it tastes quite similar and is very delicious, so there is no problem. ——Oh, and of course, we also enjoy flavored herbal tea. Would you like some? Together. There is a tea room just over there."

".....Er....."

Prompted, Naga and I headed toward the "tea room."

The herbal tea served was—in both appearance and aroma—perfectly normal—

In fact, it had a much better aroma and color than what you’d find in a mediocre

shop.

"Now, please."

Encouraged by her smile, I tentatively brought the elegantly designed teacup to my lips.

It didn't taste like anything strange was in it—or rather—

".....It’s delicious....." I muttered instinctively.

"My, my. I am glad it pleases you. Naga-san is——"

Maria turned her eyes toward Naga—and her face was filled with shock.

...Naga was just drinking the tea normally, though...?

"——It’s wonderful!"

Maria’s voice of admiration echoed around us.

She gazed at Naga with an enchanted expression.

"It’s wonderful, Naga-san! Your posture while drinking the tea, the way you move your hands, the angle of the cup! Everything is so refined! Especially! The way your pinky finger stands up while holding the cup feels so incredibly high-society!"

...Is it...? Is that it? Is high society determined by whether or not your pinky is standing up...?

Ignoring my bewildered face, Maria pressed closer to Naga.

"There are almost no people in our club who are as refined as you! You are truly someone worthy of being called 'True High-So'! .....Oh... but for someone like you to be a mere human.....

——I know! How about it, Naga-san? Why don't you take the plunge and become a vampire yourself!?"

"——WHAAAAT!?"

Even Naga cried out at this proposal.

"Let’s do that! That would definitely be for the best! If someone like you were to join, the club's status would be greatly graded up! Please, do consider it!"

".....No... that’s a bit....."

"Now, now, don't say that. ——Why not try being a vampire for just three months?

Those who become vampires now will be entered into a lottery for high-end soap or theater tickets!"

...What a cheap vampire... and a lottery, too...

"Try it... once I become one, I won't be able to turn back! For now, I have absolutely no intention of doing that..... ...Hey, Lina! Don't just watch, say something!"

"No, no. Each person decides their own life. If I were to butt in, that would be a breach of etiquette, wouldn't it?"

I took a sip of my herbal tea.

"HEY, LINAAAAA!"

...Hmm... watching Naga struggle was indeed fun in its own way... but while she was praising Naga to the skies, she wasn't paying me any attention at all, which was starting to make me a little bit annoyed...

——Well, if she invited me with a "Lina-kun, you should become a vampire too," I'd definitely be completely stuck for an answer.....

".....Ah...!"

But at those words of mine, Maria looked up as if struck.

".....Yes..... you're right..... Just as Lina-kun said..... forcing a suggestion on someone is not a high-society act..... I am sorry, Naga-san."

".....Hmph... as long as you understand."

Naga spoke with a sigh of relief, wiping away the beads of sweat.

Maria turned back to me.

".....I am sorry, Lina-kun. I misjudged you. To think you were someone who understood manners so well..... ——How about it? You, become a vampire....."

"DON'T INVITE ME!!"

——As we were doing this——

"——Excuse me."

I looked toward the sudden voice and saw Alex standing in the doorway; I hadn't even noticed when he appeared.

His expression seemed a bit strained.

"——What is the matter?"

Maria asked, sensing the unusual atmosphere. He answered in a stiff tone.

".....I discovered this while patrolling outside..... the army is heading this way....."

“.....Wha...!?”

Naga, Maria, and I all cried out at the same time.

".....W-What do you mean.....?"

"——I see.....!"

My voice followed Maria’s anxious cry. Maria and Alex both turned their gazes toward me.

I looked at them both in turn.

"The people from that town you occasionally visit——they thought you were going to harm them eventually, so they asked the Lord for help! .....They said the army never came, but... they’ve finally arrived now!"

"No way...!"

Alex’s face was filled with bewilderment.

"We have no intention of fighting! .....That said... it doesn't seem like a situation where we can talk things through....."

There was a fair number of vampires here. If they got serious, they could easily annihilate a small human army. But if they had no intention of fighting——

"——For now——is there a place where we can see the situation?"

"This way."

Alex answered my question——and under his guidance, we all reached the terrace on the third floor of the castle.

Looking out from there——

The rolling mountains, the thick trees, and the night sky overflowing with stars.

And——

".....There....."

I groaned as I looked at a section of the forest.

In the midst of the earth turned into a black shadow, an orange stain was spreading——

It was a massive crowd of people, carrying torches, heading this way.

(Pride of Darkness: To be continued)

Next Episode Preview

How on earth will Lina and Naga handle the army closing in on the castle!?

Actually, come to think of it, they've suddenly taken the side of the vampires—is that really okay for those two!?

And even before that, is that lifestyle really okay for vampires!?

A controversial work that starkly depicts the issues lying between humans and vampires, two different species (no, it's definitely not something that grand)! Pride of Darkness: Part 2!

It's hot in the summer, but endure it and wait!

Pride of Darkness (Part 2)

Synopsis Every night, a swarm of vampires appears in town, leading the people into terror!

The vampire Alexandre appears before Lina and Naga, who set out to exterminate them at the mayor's request, and declares that his kind is a superior race compared to humans!

A superior race shouldn't engage in vulgar behavior! Therefore, they are holding "High Society" etiquette classes for gentlemen and ladies here, and going into town is just field training! Inside the guided castle, under the instructor Mariatherese, vampires were diligently practicing their manners, aiming for eventual coexistence with humans!

While Lina and Naga hesitated from feeling that something was "off," a swarm of torches—presumably the subjugation army sent by the local Lord—was closing in on the Vampire Castle!

Like a water surface trembling in the wind, the carpet of flickering flames approached slowly but surely.

"……What shall we do……!?"

Alexandre remained silent for a moment at Maria’s pleading question, then turned his gaze toward us.

"Sorry, pass."

Ignoring my words—which I’d blurted out flatly and decisively before he could even open his mouth—he continued:

"A cup full of gold dust—specifically, the size of the teacups you were using earlier—for each of you. If we get through this without incident, another cup each—

How would that suit you as a request fee?"

Twitch.

Lina and Naga both gave a simultaneous, tiny shudder.

There was no need to ask what he meant.

As fellow "humans" (relatively speaking), he wanted us to either persuade or deceive that group—anyway, just make them avoid a clash with the vampires—

Alex’s red eyes were certainly making that plea.

Since we’d tried to turn him down before he could speak because we hated trouble, he was essentially saying he’d pay the fee properly.

"……Hmm……"

I put a finger to my chin, thinking.

"……But…… if that really is the Lord's army like I suspect, a little persuasion from me or Naga isn't going to do much."

"——Hmph. What are you saying, Lina?"

Naga laughed off my worries and looked at Alex and Maria.

"The point is just to avoid a clash between you and that army, right?"

"Yes. That is correct."

Hearing that, Naga puffed out her chest.

"Hmph! In that case!

It’s simply a matter of blowing those guys away with mine and Lina’s offensive spells!"

"LIKE THAT SETTLES IT!!"

I snapped, speaking for everyone present.

"In the first place! If we do that, we’ll end up as wanted fugitives!"

"Hmph! Your foresight is still shallow, Lina! If we completely annihilate the army, there won't be anyone left to think we’re the culprits! Then, suspicion will naturally fall on the vampires in this area……"

"THAT SOLVES NOTHING!!"

"But it perfectly clears the point about 'avoiding a clash,' doesn't it!?"

"It doesn't clear the point of why we're avoiding the clash! That's the problem!"

"Hmph! High-society people don't worry about such things!"

"……Um…… excuse me…… Naga-san, that statement is a bit problematic……"

Maria interjected timidly.

Taking the chance, I gave a big nod.

"See! Maria-san…… no, Mariatherese-san says so too! Or do you want to ignore her opinion and face a 'no request fee after all!' situation!?"

"……Ugh……! T-That is……!"

Before the ultimate "No Fee" attack, even the mighty Naga fell silent.

"And so, you're going to do as I say here. Let's go, Naga."

"——Please——"

"We beg of you."

Nodding slightly to the pleading Alex and Maria, Naga and I began to chant.

"Raywing!"

Our voices overlapped, and the two of us soared into the night sky!

Naga and I landed a short distance away from the swarm of torches.

Hiding among the trees, we watched the approaching group.

"……So, what's the plan, Lina?"

Naga asked in a hushed voice. I thought for a moment.

"……Well……

I guess for now, the only thing to do is lead them in the wrong direction…… though it's not a fundamental solution……"

"I see. Then I shall step out before them and—"

"No…… you'd better not. With those clothes of yours, they'll definitely mistake you for a vampire."

"How rude! Which part of me looks like a vampire!?"

Naga protested, completely lacking self-awareness.

Normally, this is where we'd start a bickering match, but unfortunately, we didn't have the time.

"Anyway, Naga, you have a different role."

I pointed in a direction away from the castle.

"I'm going to lie to the army guys and tell them 'the vampires fled that way,' so I want you to hide somewhere, Naga, and time it right to fire off an offensive spell over there. We'll gain some time, and meanwhile, we'll head back to the castle to think of a countermeasure—that's about all we can do."

"Hmph. If that's the case, I suppose it can't be helped."

"Then, Naga, please use an offensive spell at the right moment. Something flashy—Boom!—and everything! Also, once the army comes, either run or hide."

"Hmph! Leave it to me!"

With those arrogant words, Naga ran off in the direction I pointed.

……Now then…… that left my turn.

Predicting the army's path, I hid between that point and where Naga had gone—

——Rustle, rustle, rustle!

"……H-Help me!"

Right in front of the marching group, I tumbled out of the bushes and put on a terrified voice.

"……Va…… A vampire is……!"

Trying to sound out of breath, I looked up with a frightened gaze—

"——Gah."

The sound escaped me instinctively.

BOOOOOM!

Ripping through the darkness and shattering the silence, a flashy explosion and light flashed in the nightly mountains.

"……Huh……?"

At the sudden explosion, Naga frowned and looked toward the sound.

Of course, that blast—it wasn't hers.

At the blow that differed from the plan, Naga turned around to see—

Rustle, rustle, rustle!

Bursting through the bushes was none other than me, Lina Inverse!

Yes. That blast just now was an offensive spell I had fired at the army.

"——Wait——

Wait, Lina! This isn't what we talked about!"

"Agreed!"

I grabbed Naga’s hand and just kept running!

Behind us, a swarm of armor was giving chase!

"And you told me 'what’s the point of blowing them away'—"

Naga looked back at the swarm while complaining—

"……! Wait, Lina! Look at that!"

"I know! That’s why I’m freaked out and running!"

I shouted back without looking.

You couldn't tell from a distance, but up close, it was obvious.

Steel helmets, swords, and shields. They were geared up in matching equipment—but they weren't normal humans.

……Well, they probably were human once.

They were a swarm of countless, fully armed Zombies.

Come to think of it, no idiot would normally choose the night to launch an attack to exterminate vampires.

If it were an army of living humans, that is.

"What is the meaning of this!? Lina!?"

"I don't know, that’s why I fired one shot and ran!"

Zombies are, needless to say, human corpses that have been possessed by low-level

restless spirits or moved by magic.

There are "wild" zombies in the world that don't have a controller, but of course, a fully armed group like this couldn't possibly be wild.

That meant someone was definitely controlling them…… but to control such a massive number of zombies with this much coordination required an extraordinary level of skill and magical power.

While I was thinking about this as we ran—

Snap!

The bushes ahead made a sound, and two shadows appeared!

“!?”

Naga and I instinctively braced ourselves—

"What happened!?"

The voice that called out was one we recognized.

Yes. Literally dropping out of the sky were Alex and Maria.

"——You two! Why are you here?"

At my question, Alex looked troubled.

"It’s not 'why are we here.' Even though I asked for a peaceful solution, when we looked from the castle terrace, there was suddenly an explosion from an offensive spell……"

I see. So they came in a panic.

"They weren't exactly people you could talk to!"

"Well, certainly, they are an army, so they would prioritize orders……"

"I don't mean it like that! They weren't humans—they were an army of zombies!"

“……Huh?”

At my words, Alex and Maria both frowned.

"That’s why I instinctively ran…… no, I recognized that my strategic reading was fundamentally wrong and temporarily distanced myself to regroup! Someone, somewhere, is definitely controlling those guys!"

"No way…… for what purpose?"

"I don't know that!"

"——I see."

With a small nod, Maria stepped forward—gracefully, of course.

"We have no desire to fight with humans, but if the opponents are controlled dead, that is a different story. It was originally our problem to begin with—"

At Maria's look, Alex nodded.

"Then it stands to reason that we should be the ones to solve it. ——Shall we go, Mariatherese-san?"

"Yes, Alexandre-sama."

Like an invitation to a ball, the two gave an elegant bow and—

Tap!

Kicking lightly off the ground, they sped off toward the woods—toward the zombie army—at a speed humans could never imitate!

"——We're following them! Naga!"

"Why? We should just leave it to them."

"What are you saying! If we leave it all to them, I don't know if we'll get our reward!"

——Gasp!

At my point, Naga took a small breath.

Alex had said he'd give us gold dust as a reward for peacefully turning away the approaching human army. Since that was now completely impossible, we had to at least lend a hand and earn their gratitude!

"Hmph! Understood! Lina!"

"Then let's go, right now!"

And so, Naga and I also dashed into the depths of the trees!

By the time we got there, the battle had already begun.

——No. I wasn't sure if you could even call it a "battle."

"Extinguish!"

The word itself was probably the spell. With a flourish of his cloak and a shout from Alex, several dozen zombies in front of him instantly turned to dust, and their equipped weapons and armor fell to the ground with a clatter.

"——Please, sleep."

Another group of zombies was caressed by a refreshing breeze generated by the fan in Maria's hand, returning to the earth and settling there.

By the time we arrived, the area was already littered with the armor and swords left behind by the vanishing zombies.

Umm. Even if the opponents are small-fry zombies, vampires sure are strong!

Still, the enemy had numbers on their side. They could use some help.

"We'll help!"

I shouted as I arrived. Alex looked back over his shoulder.

"That would be a help! Then, take the left wing!"

"Hmph! Leave it to me!"

Naga stepped forward, puffing out her chest.

"Behold the power of my indiscriminate, wide-range purification spell……"

"STOP ITTTTTT!"

Clang!

Simultaneously with the screams of the other three (excluding Naga), I knocked Naga flat on her head with a helmet I'd picked up nearby!

"……Wait……! Wait, Lina! What was that for!?"

"Don't 'what was that for' me! If you use a spell like that, you'll purify Alex and the others too!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Well…… how should I put it…… ——Anyway, now is not the time for bickering!"

Laughing it off, Naga began to chant her spell again.

Well, it was true that blaming Naga for her mistake to increase my share of the

reward could wait until later.

For now, defeating this zombie army was the priority!

I also chanted a spell toward the slowly approaching zombie army—

And in that instant.

——Whoosh.

Clatter-clatter-clatter-clatter!

The sound of collapsing sand was drowned out by the noisy clatter of clashing metal.

“……Wha...!?”

With a groan of surprise, we all stood there, stunned.

All at once—

They had collapsed. The zombie army, of which there should have been at least a hundred or two left, had crumbled.

Of course, we hadn't done it.

To make that many zombies, crowded over a wide area, turn to dust and decay all at once—

There was only one person who could do such a thing.

The caster who had been controlling the zombies.

“……Heh heh heh…… As I thought, mere zombies are no match for you……”

"——Who’s there!?"

At the sudden raspy voice, Alex called out a challenge.

At that moment.

A presence appeared.

“!?”

Faced with its intensity, everyone instinctively took a breath.

A heavy atmosphere, similar to a deep, cold stagnation—

Specifically—Miasma.

It gathered in front of us—in the void of the night—and against the starry sky, it

formed a single shadow.

——Clad in a robe and hood, where his eyes should have been, there were only two voids.

No breath of life could be felt in that brownish-black, dried skin.

——To an uninformed observer, he would look like a mummy or a zombie.

But—the overwhelming miasma surrounding him clearly told us that the being before us was no such pushover.

"……A Lich……!?"

Alex whispered in shock.

A Lich—it is a being who, having mastered great sorcery, traded their life for even greater magical power and became an immortal existence—

In terms of name value, they might lose to vampires or zombies, but unlike zombies, they have a sense of self and control overwhelming magical power that even surpasses vampires.

As an enemy, they might be much more troublesome than a low-level demon.

……I see…… with a Lich’s overwhelming magical power, it certainly wouldn't be impossible to control an unconventional number of zombies.

"——Exactly. My name is Loganza. One who obtained immortality at the cost of my life."

Slowly—

Descending from the void to the ground, the Lich spoke.

"……Why would a Lich lead an army of zombies to pick a fight with vampires!?"

At my question, the Lich turned his gaze—no, his face—toward me.

"……Ho…… Have you already beguiled a human? You’re quite fast-acting……"

Then he turned toward Alex and Maria.

"I know. That you are plotting coexistence with humans and such. But…… how foolish…… Do you really think that living beings and we, the lifeless ones flowing through eternity, can hold hands?"

"……I……! I believe it is possible!"

Even at a time like this, the replying Alex was using high-society polite language.

——However, his expression no longer showed any signs of composure.

The Lich pointed a thin finger toward Alex and the others.

"Is that so? Then let me ask: if what attacked you just now were not zombies created by me, but human soldiers—and if there were no humans to help you, what on earth would you have done? Would you have abandoned your pride and fled? Or would you have held a blood banquet at the end of the battle? No matter how you spin it, the fact remains that you are predators and humans are the hunted. In that case, no matter what you think, the humans who are the hunted will never lend an ear to your words. Unless they are an extreme hobbyist or an eccentric, that is ……"

"……Are you saying our philosophy is…… nothing but an ideal……"

"No——

It isn't even an ideal. It's a delusion."

To the flinching Alex, the Lich ruthlessly made his declaration—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! If I just stand here and listen, you're saying an awful lot of 'kind' things, aren't you!"

It was Naga's stupid laughter that easily shattered the tense atmosphere.

She suddenly pointed a finger sharply at the Lich.

"For someone who's doing nothing but criticizing the other's actions, you haven't given a single reason why you attacked with a zombie army! In other words! You sent that zombie army for a reason you can't talk about here!"

"……Ugh……"

At Naga's point, Loganza showed a slight flicker of agitation.

"Knowing full well that vampires would be hesitant to lay a hand on humans, you took the trouble to create a zombie army that looked like a normal army and launched a nighttime raid just to show off. Since you went to such lengths, I've got it! You're after the vampires' treasure!"

"How could that be! In the first place, even if I got my hands on money or treasure, I wouldn't have any use for it!"

Loganza instinctively snapped back at Naga’s point.

……It was true…… even if he had money, if this guy, who looked every bit the undead, strolled into a shop and tried to be friendly, saying, "Boy, the sunlight’s been harsh lately, hasn't it? Oh, ma'am, I'll take one daikon radish," the whole town would definitely panic.

……Well, whether or not a Lich would buy a daikon was another matter.

——In that case, his goal was——

"It’s probably some stupid reason like 'I can't stand that only vampires get to be friends with humans,'" I said, glaring at the Lich with flat eyes.

"Since you were human once, you probably want to be pampered by pretty girls. But since you look like that, it’s just an unreachable dream after all—is that what you were thinking? And then you heard about them and thought, 'I won't let only the vampires have all the fun. Since it’s come to this, I’ll get in their way,' and attacked, right? Hmm?"

Loganza wore an expression of displeasure.

"……Mmm…… Quite the insight."

Wait, I was right!? Hey! I only said it to provoke him……

"……I see, so that was it."

Maria reached out a hand toward Loganza.

"You seem to be quite distressed about your appearance…… but there is absolutely no need to worry about that…… ——It is true that you are black and shriveled……"

"DON'T CALL ME 'SHRIVELED'!!"

Loganza immediately snapped back at Maria’s words with all his might.

Maria thought for a moment.

"Then…… dark brown and crispy."

"I WON'T FORGIVE 'CRISPY' EITHER!!"

"……No……! To say that both 'shriveled' and 'crispy' are no good is unreasonable……! Then what on earth should I say?"

"……D-Damn you……! This is the very definition of being 'politely rude'! How dare you

mock me this much! Since it’s come to this, I shall destroy you all right here!"

"Ah! How short-tempered! That isn't high-society at all!"

"……No. He’d be mad. That’s normal."

Ignoring me as I interjected, Loganza, Alex, and Maria faced each other in the night wind.

"……A Lich…… huh…… He’s tough……"

A look of tension crossed Alex’s face. Beside him, Maria nodded.

"……Yes…… The fact that 'Lich' sounds similar to 'Rich' and gives off a high-society vibe makes him particularly tough."

Is that why he’s tough? Hey.

It’s true that compared to vampires, Liches have greater magical power and fewer weaknesses.

And the biggest problem was that Alex and Maria seemed to have a strange sense of inferiority toward the Lich.

——In that case——

Naga and I looked at each other and nodded.

"Wait a minute!"

Raising our voices, the two of us stepped forward. Looking at Alex and Maria, I said:

"You seem to be bad with him…… so, if you like, shall we just blast this Lich away ourselves?"

"——Kh-hahahahahaha!"

At my proposal, Loganza burst out laughing. In a tone that completely looked down on us, he said:

"Vigorous humans, aren't you. But this is a matter that has nothing to do with you. I’ll have you mere humans step back."

"Whaaaat are you saying. If you persuade or defeat them and the vampires start sucking human blood again, it won't be 'someone else's problem' at all. You can't even understand that? Is your brain moldy?"

"What did you say! I’m careful about the preservation state of my brain! ……Well, fine.

If you can't understand your own powerlessness, I shall make you realize it……"

“Mega Brand!”

BOOM!

Before he could even finish his sentence, the black mass generated by Naga swallowed Loganza’s entire body!

That one hit home! It’s an offensive spell that can obliterate even a Brass Demon in one shot. Even a Lich wouldn't stand a chance against—

"——I shall make you realize it. With your own body."

But—from the depths of the darkness, the continuation of the words that should have been cut off forever flowed out!

——What!?

After the darkness of the Mega Brand vanished, Loganza was standing there as if nothing had happened!

"……If there are two or more enemies, naturally there is the possibility of a surprise attack…… I noticed long ago that the girl over there was secretly chanting a spell. ……However, it seems you didn't notice that my left finger was drawing a sign of protection in the air……"

He said something incredible quite casually. It’s true that if you have immense magical power, it’s possible to cast spells without chanting, but—

"Now, here I come. It might hurt a bit if you don't dodge well."

As he spoke, the eyes of the Lich—which should have lost their light—seemed to flash for a moment.

Reflexively, Naga and I leaped away.

In that instant.

THUD!

With a sound that shook the trees, the ground where we’d been standing just a second ago was gouged out, sending up a cloud of dust!

An invisible shockwave!?

Next, Loganza began chanting a spell. It was likely a devastating move that brooked

no argument—but I wasn't going to let him!

I unleashed the spell I'd chanted!

"Duo Giga!"

Crackle-crackle-crackle!

The lightning of generated magical power struck the Lich directly!

Wrapped in lightning, Loganza's figure vanished easily—

"……Creating one's own 'shadow' is something even a human mage can do. ……Though I won't say it's easy."

The voice came from further beyond where he had vanished.

At the same time, as if bleeding into the darkness, the Lich appeared once again!

——When did he swap with a shadow!?

In the hands of the standing Lich, the light of magical power from spells he'd already finished weaving was glowing!

This is bad!

"——Then, good day to you."

Loganza unleashed the lights of magical power one by one toward me and Naga!

The two lights surged toward us, twisting the surrounding space—

——C-Crack!

Suddenly, with a shattering sound, they scattered and vanished into the void!

Stepping in between us and the Lich and taking the blow was, needless to say—

"Alex! Maria!"

"It is Alexandre."

"I believe I told you to call me Mariatherese, Lina-kun."

The two vampires, even at a time like this, didn't break their high-society style.

"We shall fight too after all."

"Yes. This was originally a fight Loganza-san started with us. Fighting is definitely not high-society, but leaving it to others is even less so."

The two spoke in turn while keeping their eyes fixed on Loganza.

"……Ho…… So the two vampires join in as well."

But the tone of Loganza's voice still showed no signs of losing its composure.

"……Just right. Allow me to show you a result of my magical research that I've spent a long time on—a little application of transformation magic."

As he spoke, he made signs with both hands—

Ruuuu-aaaa-aaaa-uuuu-aaaa……

In the instant he roared, the darkness that erupted from under his feet momentarily enveloped the Lich's figure—and what appeared after it vanished was Loganza, transformed into a complete monstrosity!

He was standing on two legs, but his head had swelled to twice its size, with two eerie cracks on each side.

his long, shriveled arms had grown even thinner and longer—and had increased in number to ten.

Clack!

With a sound, the ten arms formed signs, and the four cracks on his head each began to weave a different curse!

No way—are those mouths!?

"……Heh heh heh…… A composite hybrid spell using multiple curses and signs…… Try taking this."

The mouth in front, which wasn't chanting a curse, boasted.

"……T-This is……! This isn't high-society at all!"

Maria flinched and stepped back. Both Alex and Naga were taken aback by the sight—

And then, I suddenly thought of something, and frowned—

"……Hey……

If you 'want to be friends with humans' in the first place, couldn't you just use transformation magic to turn into a human……?"

……Silence…….

Loganza’s spell-casting suddenly stopped—

“……Oh.”

The five mouths spoke in unison, and the ten hands clapped together five times.

……Ah……

“ARE YOU AN IDIOTTTTTTTT!”

KABOOM!

With a scream, mine and Naga’s—decidedly not high-society—flying kicks struck Loganza directly—

"——Now, sign here. With this, you are a full member of our High Society Club."

"Hmm, hmm…… Etiquette is indeed important."

——A while after the battle——

Loganza the Lich was suddenly signing a membership application at the Vampire Castle.

……Well, whatever…… at this point……

"——Now then, Loganza-san. You are now a fine member. ——Oh, that’s right."

As if remembering something, Maria took a square box from a cupboard.

There was one round hole on the top.

"Those who join now will be entered into a lottery for various prizes."

A lottery box. Hey.

"Ho ho. Let’s see……"

Loganza stuck his hand into the hole, rustled around inside, and then handed a slip of paper to Maria.

Maria carefully cut it open with scissors.

"My! Loganza-san! You won a high-end soap set! That’s wonderful!"

"Oh! ……Though, come to think of it, parts of my body have already become soap-like."

"My. Hehe-hehe."

"Hahahaha."

……No, really, I don't care anymore…… at this point……

Naga and I stood by with wide eyes, just staring blankly at such a pleasant interaction……

And so, one incident came to an end—

Though I'm well aware there's a theory that it didn't really end.

Since I got a bit of a fee from Alex and the others under the name of "trouble compensation," it was fine in terms of profit—but in the first place, I hadn't carried out the request I first received from the townspeople: "Exterminate the vampires."

So, in the end.

I told them the townspeople were frightened and proposed that they stop their group nighttime walks in town, and that they use a spell to cover the area around the castle with a stone wall to make it look like the castle had disappeared.

Alex and Maria, who had been a bit hesitant, quietly nodded at my persuasion that it was to avoid unnecessary conflict.

——And so——

Everything settled peacefully, and the vampires are surely still diligently practicing their manners somewhere even now.

Happily ever after.

……Probably.

(Pride of Darkness: END)

Lina-chan's Great Fashion Strategy*

(Editors note: This story is Slayers Excellent OVA's episode 3)

"Is it you? The one they call Lina Inverse?"

The menu was potage soup, steamed lobster, lamb sauté, roast chicken, salad, and a baguette. She approached me at a local town tavern while I was enjoying a light lunch.

"...Yeah... what about it?" I said, swallowing my food before stopping my knife and fork.

She looked to be in her early twenties. A beauty with pale blonde hair, wearing a formal dress with impeccable precision.

...*Buzz*...

The other customers in the shop began to whisper. Some of them even hurried out of the establishment.

...*What's the meaning of this...? That reaction...?*

Sure, there are some less-than-stellar rumors about me floating around the world, but this was the first time I'd seen this kind of reaction just from my name being mentioned.

However, completely ignoring the reactions of the other customers, the woman in the formal dress spent a few moments staring me down from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Eventually, she muttered:

"...A bit lacking..."

Twitch.

"What exactly is 'lacking'?"

I glared at her with a hostile look, but she remained perfectly composed.

"Your outfit," she stated, quite simply.

...For the record, it's not like I'm dressed that weirdly. I think it's a fairly standard sorcerer style...

"The black mantle is fine, but the rest won't do. A sorcerer should, above all else, be formal! A black robe so plain it looks deadly! A black hood to avoid public gaze! The talismans you wear must be black crystal! Shady! Plain! Sneaky! Make the general public think: 'These guys are definitely committing crimes in the shadows!' *That* is what formal fashion for a sorcerer should be!"

She shouted this with all her might, her voice echoing throughout the shop.

"...Let me ask... did you come here to pick a fight with me...?"

"Certainly not." She brushed her hair up with her right index finger. "I have a job request. Fifty gold coins—how does that sound?"

Twitch-twitch!

At her words, my ears moved slightly.

—Fifty gold coins—

Depending on the content of the job, of course, that is by no means a small sum.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" she asked, gesturing toward the empty seat at the table. I nodded silently.

"My name is Tatiana Dayward. I am a fashion designer in this town of Richelieu." She began to speak only after sitting down with elegant grace.

"A fashion designer?"

"Yes. —Though, what I do is more like perfecting the design of clothing. Specifically, variation designs for formal style. The reason formal is formal is because the design has already reached a state of completion! Therefore, all we designers can do is increase that level of perfection!"

Again, she started getting heated, losing herself in her own speech.

"...U-Um..."

"—Right. We were talking about the job." Tatiana cleared her throat lightly. "However... Recently in this town, centered around teenagers, a boring fashion trend has begun to spread! The cause is one woman! This woman, who calls herself a fashion designer, is releasing one thing after another that—to put it mildly—cannot be called formal! No, calling them 'designs' or even 'clothes' is an insult! Furthermore, she even makes public statements openly denying formal fashion! Denying something that has reached the pinnacle of perfection is the height of folly! Death to the foolish!

—Therefore, I trust you will lend me your strength to punish this woman?"

"Get lost. You."

That was my answer.

People often say that when spring or summer comes around, the number of weirdos increases. But, of course, they're wrong. They are active all year round. Just like that woman who approached me in the diner earlier.

...Sheesh... this is why people who are too intense in their convictions are trouble...

I had just finished a job in this town and was taking a breather. I was enjoying a leisurely lunch when *that* happened. It's best to leave an unlucky town like this as quickly as possible. Otherwise—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! So this is where you were! Lina Inverse!"

...Trouble comes looking for you. ...Looks like I didn't get away in time this time...

Pretening I didn't hear anything and walking away was, of course, out of the question. If the person behind me was who I expected, I'd just end up being called out by name anyway. Steeling myself, I turned around—

"—Ugeh!?"

My face involuntarily contorted, and I froze on the spot. Standing there as I turned around was Naga the Serpent—wearing her usual seasonal-logic-defying outfit, her signature idiotic laugh, and sticking to me like a goldfish's tail as always!

—However, if it had just been her, I would have been prepared for it. What surprised me was the group of people hanging around her.

Some in lamé high-leg bikinis, others in one-piece dresses with their midriffs exposed. Though the designs were different, they were a group no different from Naga in that they wore strange clothes that ignored the season. In the corner of my vision, I saw the passersby scrambling to retreat.

"I've found us a good job."

I made an instant decision. No matter what, I should escape this place without hesitation. I spun around on my heel—

"Naga-san, who is this? This tacky girl?"

Twitch!

The voice from behind stopped me in my tracks.

"Pfft. Don't be like that, Marty. She might look like that, but she's actually quite useful. Well, as far as I know, in terms of ability, she's probably second only to me."

"Second to Naga-san!? Heh! Not bad! Considering how dinky she looks."

Twitch-twitch-twitch!

I turned around slowly. Unaware of the murderous intent slumbering deep in my eyes, Naga pointed to the person standing next to her.

"Let me introduce you, Lina. This is the client, Marty."

She looked to be in her late teens. Her hair was an unnaturally dyed red, and she wore a red bikini and red boots that looked freezing just to look at. The red glove she wore only on her left hand was studded with metal here and there.

"I'm Marty Rainford. I'm, like, a fashion designer in this town."

She stepped forward with an incredibly arrogant attitude and began her self-introduction.

—I see. So this is the person the woman from earlier wanted to "punish." ...I can certainly see why she'd feel that way.

"Girls my age, like, totally get my 'best sense,' but old geezers and hags don't get it at all. Like, my 'sense.' Well, I'm planning to take over the industry someday, and I'll make the gramps and grannies understand my greatness too. I thought I'd start by dyeing everyone in this town in my colors. But, there's this one girl in town who's, like, super annoying! Someone who messes around with tacky, old-fashioned clothes and acts like a designer! Plus, she nitpicks my sense every single time! I'm so annoyed I thought I'd, like, shut her up. Well, if you take the job, I don't mind paying you what's due. And if you want, I could even remodel those clothes of yours into something with a bit more sense..."

"Explosion Array!" **DU-GOOOOOOOOON!**

My blow of rage blew away the suspicious group, Naga included.

"That request from earlier—I'll gladly accept it!"

It wasn't long after that that I rushed back to Tatiana.

"I knew it! Anything other than formal style is a heresy! It must be purged into the depths of darkness!"

Whether she was genuinely happy or just bloodthirsty, Tatiana was getting hyped up all by herself at my reply. Of course, I didn't accept this job because I agreed with her. To be honest, I didn't want to take it—but I hated the idea of letting Naga and Marty run wild even more. If by some mistake Marty's style became accepted by the world, it would be filled with people dressed like mass-produced Nagas! *That* must be prevented at all costs!

"It seems you're fired up too, Lina-san," Tatiana said with an eerie smile, sensing my determination. "Then, immediately! Please carry out the plan I've been devising!"

"A plan?"

"Yes! Using your attack magic, destroy that woman Marty's workshop in this town in a single blow...!"

"Wait just a minute."

"Is something wrong?" she asked back, completely unfazed.

"If I do that, I'll be caught by the guards in a heartbeat!?"

"It's fine. I'm not the one who will be caught."

"Hey."

"What are you saying, Lina-san?" She patted my shoulder and pointed off toward the horizon. "To protect the formal style backed by tradition and prestige, I wouldn't mind turning this town—no, the world—into scorched earth! Aren't we comrades who swore that together!?"

"We didn't swear that. We definitely didn't."

"No matter what happens, everything is justified for the sake of protecting the formal style!"

She was staring off into the distance with eyes that were completely gone. ...Maybe accepting this woman's request was a mistake... The thought crossed my mind, but of course, it was too late now. I had no objection to blowing away Naga and Marty. In fact, I'd already done it once. However, I had no desire to be treated as a criminal for blowing up buildings in town. So, what to do? —In that case—

DU-GAAAAAAN!

A roar and an explosion through the wall of the building shattered my train of thought!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

An idiotic laugh echoed through the air, overpowering the lingering sound of the explosion!

"Naga!?"

Through the hole in the wall, standing tall amidst the settling smoke, were Naga and Marty!

"I see... so that's how it is." Marty looked at Tatiana and then me with a hostile gaze. "You kicked the good offer Naga-san brought and suddenly blew us away... turns out you were already hired by that tacky girl over there. I guess tacky girls stick together."

Vein. A blue vein popped on my forehead for a second. But it seemed Tatiana was just as angry.

"Don't make me laugh! How dare someone so immature, who doesn't even understand tradition, badmouth others! I don't want to hear the word 'fashion' from someone who can't distinguish between innovation and strange, low-quality things meant only to shock!" She shot back, refusing to lose ground.

"Hah!? I'm the one who doesn't want to hear the word 'design' from someone who just clings to tradition and messes around with stuff made by people from the past! If being old is so great, why don't you go bow down to a giant tortoise!?"

"You're the one! If you like 'innovative' so much, why don't you make a Pupukamasu Blue Frog kigurumi and go perform in a kids' show!?"

"You b—h!? You looking for a fight!?"

"You're the one starting it!?"

"Fine! It's a duel!"

"I accept!"

Sparks flew between Tatiana and Marty's gazes. Marty pointed toward the edge of town.

"You know the field out past the edge of town!? I'll be waiting there when the sunset hits the mountains, so you'd better show up! You can bring as many combatants as you want. Well, I know the guts of people who talk about 'tradition' and 'prestige' are

pathetic anyway, so if you're too scared to come, that’s fine. But if you don't show, remember that everything you say afterward is just the 'howl of a losing dog'!"

"Fine! You'd better not run away either! Be there on time!"

The two glared at each other for a moment and then looked away simultaneously. However—my gaze and Naga’s were still clashing.

"Hmph... it seems we're enemies this time, Lina Inverse!"

"You think you can beat me, Naga?"

"What a foolish question! Do you think you can stand against my sense and beauty, and the person who can understand it!? Now is the time for true beauty to spread across the world!"

"Something that evil... I'll never allow it!"

I was burning with a sense of mission from the bottom of my heart.

"—Let's go, Naga-san." Marty’s words interrupted our stare-down.

"Hmph. Fine. The answer to who is right will be made clear this evening. Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Leaving behind their parting shots, the two turned their backs and left. ...D-Damn them!

"It's a decisive battle... Lina-san!"

"I know!"

Tatiana and I looked at each other and nodded deeply at the same time.

Time passed. The sun began to sink. Tatiana, myself, and five of her followers left her atelier just as the sunset was dyeing the town madder red. There was still a little time before the sun reached the mountains in the west.

"Hmph. Knowing that impatient woman, she’s probably already at the dueling place, saying 'she's late' or something." Tatiana said as she walked down the twilight streets.

"I'm sure that's the case."

"Honestly, it's such a shame she doesn't understand what Tatiana-sama is saying."

The followers chimed in agreeably. All the followers were women—seamstresses from Tatiana's atelier. Needless to say, they were all dressed in typical "seamstress" clothes

that screamed "nobody dresses like this nowadays."

To tell the truth, right before we left, Tatiana tried to force a black robe and hood on me, saying I should look more like a sorcerer, but I refused, saying there was a proper reason for my current outfit.

—It’s not an excuse; there really is a reason. A sorcerer who stays shut in a room doing research might be fine in a long, trailing black robe, but for an outdoorsy type like me, that's trouble. There are many times I walk through forests or grasslands. A robe is just in the way no matter how you look at it. Long boots to protect my feet. Gloves for the same reason. The mantle provides warmth and serves as a sheet when sleeping outdoors. If it gets in the way in the forest, I can just take it off and fold it. ...Well, if you really get down to it, having long hair is also a lot of trouble, but that's a "maiden's stubbornness" I won't give up on.

"—Now then."

Tatiana stopped dead in her tracks in the middle of town. Passersby, sensing something was about to start, hurried away.

"...What's wrong?"

At my question, she pointed to a house on a street corner.

"That's Marty’s hideout! Now! Lina-san! While they're away, use an attack spell to take it out in one blow!"

"Wait just a minute!" I was startled by her sudden instruction. "Weren't we going to the duel!?"

"We are. Of course. I absolutely hate the idea of that woman saying I 'ran away.' We're going, but—before that! We must destroy the evil hideout she calls an atelier!"

"I told you! If you do that, you'll be caught by the guards!"

"It's fine! They were the ones who broke the wall of my atelier first! So, even if I break that woman's house now, they were the ones who started it! Therefore, all the blame lies with them! Even if tens of thousands die as collateral damage, it's all self-defense!"

"No, no, no!" I waved my hands frantically.

...Hmm... it's absolutely necessary to prevent Naga and Marty’s sense from spreading to the world, but letting this Tatiana run wild also feels quite dangerous... Maybe the best thing would be to blow everyone away all at once in the middle of the duel...

But if I do that, Tatiana obviously won't pay the reward.

"Come on! Lina-san! Hurry!"

"...Uhh..."

"Come on! Come on! Come on!"

DU-DO-GAAAAN!

A distant explosion cut off Tatiana's words.

"!?"

Everyone looked toward the sound. A single plume of black smoke was rising in the south of the town. —Wait, that direction is... if I recall—

"No way!? My atelier!?"

"...Looks like you were both thinking the same thing..."

"Marty! How cowardly!"

"Pot calling the kettle black. You can't talk."

"...However, if that's the case... they must pass through this spot before heading to the hill! Then, I'll destroy her atelier right in front of Marty's eyes! He-he-he-he-he!"

With completely gone eyes and a suppressed laugh, Tatiana stood tall in the twilight street, her gaze fixed resolutely on the end of the road.

Eventually—several silhouettes appeared across the orange world.

"—You certainly took your time." Tatiana's voice echoed in the sunset sky. The group ahead stopped in their tracks for a moment.

"—Wh—why are you here!?" Marty's voice was filled with genuine agitation.

The group that approached at a trot was, of course, Marty, Naga, and six followers. As expected, these followers were clad in incomprehensible clothing—outfits with meaningless rings attached, hats of mysterious design, and so on. Naturally, it was impossible to tell from their appearance whether they were mercenaries, sorcerers, or just townspeople.

"The reason we're here? It's simple. To do the same thing you did."

"Wh... what!?"

At Tatiana's words, Marty's face changed color, visible even in the sunset.

"You've got to be kidding me! I won't let you blow up my atelier any more than you already have!"

Marty fell for Tatiana's bluff easily. It was basically a confession that she was the one who blew up Tatiana's atelier. ...Wait, "any more than you already have"?

"...Hey, 'any more than you already have'... has Tatiana blown up Marty's atelier before? By any chance?" I whispered to one of the seamstresses nearby.

She replied with a refreshing smile. "Yes. This kind of thing happens all the time. Of course, our atelier has been blown up many times too."

Hey, hey, hey, hey!?

"All the time... and you don't get caught by the guards!?"

"Yes. No one has been killed or injured, and Tatiana-sama seems to pay more than the standard amount of compensation to the owners of the buildings caught in the crossfire, so it seems no one wants to report her to the guards."

...Is that okay... people of this town...?

I see... the reason people were running away at the first diner and along the road was because they were afraid of getting caught in the mess with Tatiana and Marty.

"But... who blows it up and how...?"

"We do, of course. Working under Tatiana-sama, we've become quite skilled at handling explosives... —Oh, but I'm also good at cross-stitch and hemming."

"...I see... that's great..." I replied half-heartedly. ...What else was I supposed to say to this conversation?

I turned my gaze back to Tatiana and Marty—and I realized something. While continuing their fruitless staring match and exchange of nonsensical insults, the two were slowly, slowly closing the distance.

—It looked like the dueling ground wasn't going to be the field, but right here.

"Hah!"

Who was it that kicked off first? Tatiana or Marty? The two of them crossed in the sunset! In each of their fingertips—when did they bring them out?—a single needle glinted in the evening light. And—

"—Kuh!?" It was Marty who groaned and recoiled. On the left side of the flashy red bikini covering her chest—

"—This is...!? A baby chick applique!?"

Yes. In that instant they passed each other, Tatiana had sewn a baby chick applique onto Marty’s left breast!

"Hmph... the basics of applique are the chick, the tulip, or the sun! An orthodox motif that can cover a wide area and is popular with children!"

"Not bad! As always! But you're still soft! You didn't even notice what was done to you! Look at your belt!"

"—Wh...!?" This time it was Tatiana's turn to cry out in surprise.

The belt that had been a plain black leather one until a moment ago had been remodeled into something with studs and chain hooks—a somehow very heavy design. The surface was also shining strangely, as if coated with grease or something. To remodel a belt this much in that instant! I don't care, but I feel like the needle she held has absolutely nothing to do with the remodeling!

"...T-This...! My precious Zephilian calfskin tanned leather belt, turned into something so 'unformal'!"

"You're the one! Sewing a baby chick applique onto lamé fabric I specifically made from Elmekian firefly shells! You're so annoying! Everyone! Let's get 'em!"

"Yeah!"

"Everyone! Death to the unformal!"

"Yes!"

In response to their orders, both sides' followers opened fire! As Tatiana's seamstress blocked the opponent's movement with lace-knitting like a spider, the iron studs on the clothes of Marty’s followers flew out like countless pebbles and attacked!

"You guys are tacky!" One of Marty’s followers removed one of the rings attached to her clothes and threw it at a seamstress.

But the seamstress didn't panic. She let a cotton thread flow on the wind and changed the trajectory of the flying ring without killing its momentum. The destination of the redirected ring was Marty’s atelier. The ring smashed through the window and flew inside—

GU-GAAAAAN!

In the next moment, Marty’s atelier exploded!

"Crap!? Did it ignite the gunpowder inside!?" Marty gritted her teeth.

Don't ask why there was gunpowder in a fashion designer's atelier. Given their personalities, it’s not surprising they used the atelier as a weapons depot. And Naga and I—having taken our distance—began chanting our spells at the exact same time.

—Everything will be decided in one blow. I was certain of it. Naga would probably unleash a massive spell that hit friend and foe alike, as usual. If that’s the case, I’ll just respond with a big one of my own! Of course, I can't use something on the level of Dragon Slave, but I have spells with enough destructive power to blow away only people without destroying the surrounding buildings. ...Well, it seems Tatiana will handle it even if I accidentally blow up a building. Of course, I’d be caught in it too in this situation, but she would surely say this: as long as we win, it's fine!

The spell I chanted was—Earth Golem Lightning Array. It’s a wide-range lightning spell. It doesn't have one-hit kill power, but if you take it, you won't be able to move for a while. Since the range is so wide, it's impossible to dodge.

My spell was completed—and at the same time, Naga’s spell seemed to be completed too! Not if I can help it!

"Earth Golem Lightning Array!" My spell and—

"Wind Demon Exploding Blast!" —Naga's spell activated at the exact same time!

—She went with a wind spell!? A double-knockout!? The moment I thought that—

ZAP-ZAP-ZAP!

Fierce lightning and a violent gale went wild.

"...Ugh... ow... here... we are..."

It was after nightfall when a haggard me, Tatiana, and her group arrived at another of her ateliers. Today’s battle was—a draw, I suppose. The wide-range lightning spell I released and the wide-range wind spell Naga released. The two spells, fired simultaneously, must have caused some strange interference, because everyone took quite a lot of damage. No one had the will or strength left to continue fighting, and it ended with both sides retreating.

"...The remaining ateliers... are two..." Perhaps due to exhaustion, Tatiana's words

sounded weak. "...Maybe instead of having all our ateliers destroyed... we should look for a way to coexist with that woman..."

"Whaaaaaaaaaaat are you saying!?" I was the first to object. "If I become all buddy-buddy with someone who put *me* through this, the name of Lina Inverse will be ruined! Tatiana! If you quit here, you're not a woman!"

"...P-Put you through this... but in the first place, it was your spell and the enemy sorcerer's spell..."

"Whatever the process, I hold a grudge about the result! That's what a maiden's heart is! Just you watch! Naga! Marty! Next time, I'll make you cry!"

Ignoring the dejected Tatiana and the others, I was burning with the passion for revenge all by myself!

"Anyway! The only way is to strike first!" My voice echoed through the sunken atmosphere of the atelier. "You said there are two ateliers left on this side, but how many are left for Marty?"

"According to our investigation... there should be one left. Unless she has a hidden atelier or something." One of the seamstresses answered in place of the somewhat dazed Tatiana.

I patted Tatiana's shoulder and said, "See? Then it's an easy win. We have two. The opponent has one. Even if one of ours is destroyed, if we destroy her one, we win!"

"...True... that's right, but..."

"Why are you suddenly getting cold feet!? You were saying stuff like 'a life or two is nothing to protect formal style,' weren't you!? Or what!? Are you saying formal style can't beat someone like Marty after all!?"

Twitch. Tatiana's eyebrow twitched slightly at my words. Good! One more push!

"If you give up here, what do you think will happen!? Everyone will say, 'Formal isn't a design after all, she knew she couldn't win and gave up!' That's what Marty will say! If that happens, it's all over! No matter what you say later, it'll be dismissed as the 'howl of a losing dog'! The rumors will spread across the world, a 'Formal Eradication Movement' will arise, and the world will become entirely unformal! Eventually, it'll be a world where some old guy at the greengrocer sells purple cabbage in fluorescent pink bikini briefs! Are you okay with that!?"

Even I felt the logic was a bit forced, but there are times when momentum is more

important than logic when persuading others.

"...True..."

Tatiana's entire body seemed to sway. The energy that had almost completely vanished earlier was rising up like an aura again.

"...You're right... what on earth was I hesitating for...?"

She suddenly stood up with a *whoosh!*, puffed out her chest, and clenched her fists.

"Exactly as Lina-san says! We must prevent the unformal from running rampant and shrouding the world in darkness! If an atelier is broken, we can just rebuild it! However! Correcting the values of people who have once strayed onto the wrong path is a Herculean task! Therefore, now is the time to stake everything and eradicate the unformal, the root of all evil! Even if it results in sinking this town into a sea of blood!"

"Ohhhhhhhh! *Clap clap clap clap!*"

The followers—the seamstresses—sent up a stir of admiration and generous applause, shedding a torrent of tears.

"As expected of you! Tatiana-sama!"

"We were waiting for you to say that!"

"That's the world's best designer for you! We will help you, in our own small way!"

"—You guys!" Tatiana hugged them tightly. "Thank you! Everyone! We will protect the formal style and eradicate the unformal! For that purpose, all actions are justice! Even if it looks like the path of an evil demon to others, that's just their imagination!"

"Yes! To eradicate the unformal, we're prepared to sell out our parents and siblings!" the seamstresses said with completely gone eyes.

...I wonder... the compensation for the townspeople who were inconvenienced by the fight with Marty... I hope they didn't actually sell their parents and siblings to raise that money...? ...Even though I was the one who egged them on, now I feel like these guys should be eliminated too... Well, for now, I'll think about that after I get the reward.

"Anyway! Now that it's decided, let's move fast! Let's head to the enemy's atelier immediately..."

...*Rumble*... A distant tremor in the earth could be heard at that exact moment.

"Outside!?"

I ran to the window, opened it, leaned out, and looked around. Above the town, dyed in the colors of the night, were stars and a thin moon that looked like light leaking from a crack. Under the faint light of the moon and stars—

"What is that!? That thing!?" Tatiana's voice from the next window drifted on the wind.

Something huge was moving through the night town. It was dark, so I couldn't see well, but it was about the size of a nearby house. It was crushing the buildings lined up on both sides of the street as it came straight toward us!

—What on earth—

"No way!? That's!"

"You know what that is!?" I asked, looking at the seamstress who had screamed while looking out from beside me.

"—That is—Marty's last remaining atelier, the Ninth Atelier!"

"—What!?"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

As if reacting to the seamstress's words, a high-pitched laugh I didn't really want to hear echoed through the night town! If you looked closely, on top of the approaching giant thing was a single suspicious silhouette!

Flash! In an instant, light was born in the darkness. The light from the released magical energy illuminated the caster! Long hair the color of darkness. Shoulder guards with spikes, and a costume that ignored the season! I knew she'd show up sooner or later. Naga the Serpent!

"I know you're there! Lina Inverse! And Tatiana Dayward! I've come to pay back what I owe you from earlier!"

"Exactly!"

Stepping up beside Naga was Marty, who had changed into a silver lamé bikini!

"Tatiana! I'm super annoyed about earlier! So I thought I'd seriously crush you this time! I'm going to settle this! With this **Heavy Mobile Workshop, Marty IX**!"

"—Heavy Mobile Workshop!?" Tatiana cried out in shock.

"Wh... what should we do!? Tatiana-sama!?"

"If something like that attacks us...!"

"Calm down!" I barked at the panicked seamstresses. "Don't worry! They're just moving a whole building by applying the spell to create stone golems! It's just a bluff!"

I said this with a fearless smile, glaring at the approaching Heavy Mobile Workshop.

"A-Are you sure it's really okay!?"

"Of course! I'll show you the proof right now!"

I puffed out my chest and told the anxious Tatiana. Then I chanted a spell—

"Vibration Bullet!" (Shindoudan)

I unleashed the spell toward the approaching thing! It had enough destructive power to easily break through a decent stone wall. The blow was supposed to easily shatter the wall of the Heavy Mobile Workshop Naga was controlling. However, before my spell could hit—

CRASH-THUD-BANG!

Suddenly, an arm extended from the Marty IX, ripped the roof off a nearby building, and held it up in front of it!

Smash! The blow I released only managed to break that roof.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! How naive, Lina Inverse! Do you think such a spell will work against the 'Nearby Roof Shield' of this Marty IX!?"

Gah! So she's using that tactic!? Attaching arms to the mobile workshop and, in an emergency, ripping the roofs off nearby buildings to use as shields! With this, no matter how much they're attacked, as long as there are roofs on the neighbors' houses, they have endless replacements.

If that's the case, I have no choice but to use a wide-range attack spell, but a spell that can do enough damage to the workshop would have to be something like Dragon Slave. But no matter how you look at it, I can't use something like that in the middle of town. There's the option of flying directly into the workshop and attacking from the inside, but they would obviously intercept. That's too risky.

"What are we going to do!? Lina-san!?" Tatiana's desperate scream.

In the meantime, Marty IX was approaching, knocking down houses along the way.

"—It can't be helped! For now, let's retreat! We'll settle this at our last remaining

atelier!"

"B-But... that other atelier is in a bit of an inconvenient place. Even for buying fabric..."

"Aaaaah! This is no time for that! Anyway, if we don't run now, we're finished along with this atelier! If that happens, who's going to stop Marty and the others!?"

I said to the hesitant Tatiana. She was silent for a moment. "...I understand... it seems that's the only way..." she muttered bitterly.

"Good! Now that it's decided, let's get the hell out of here!"

Tatiana and the seamstresses nodded at my words. Everyone rushed toward the front door—

RUMBLE-RUMBLE-RUMBLE!

"Hyaaaaaaaa!?"

As soon as we opened the door, the huge body of Marty IX was looming before us! —Its movement speed is faster than I thought!? It's impossible to run from here!

"The back!" I turned and started running.

Thud! I kicked open the back door to find a narrow back alley stretching into the darkness. "This way!" Following Tatiana, who was leading the way, we rushed through the alley.

BOOM! It wasn't long before a roar echoed through the air, shaking the night. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw Tatiana's atelier collapsing.

"Ah! My atelier!?" Tatiana stopped and lamented.

"Don't stop! Run!"

At my reprimand—two arms reached out through the settling dust! Just as the huge arms of Marty IX were about to catch the stationary Tatiana!

"—Kuh!"

Seamstress #1 groaned, took something small from her pocket, and pressed a switch.

Click.

DU-GOOOOOON!

In an instant, a flashy explosion enveloped Marty IX!

"—This is!?" Tatiana asked as she hurried away. Seamstress #1 replied with a proud face.

"Yes! I thought something like this might happen, so I built a self-destruct device in the basement without telling you, Tatiana-sama!"

Don't build that. Not that.

"My, how thoughtful of you."

Don't praise her. Not you either.

"Long talk later!" I cut in from the side. "That doesn't mean the enemy's workshop is down! We need to leave this place as quickly as—"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems you finally understand our power! Lina Inverse!"

An idiotic laugh echoed around, cutting through the lingering sound of the explosion! Emerging from the smoke was the almost unscathed Marty IX, with Naga and Marty standing on its roof!

"This is all for the sake of spreading our refined sense to the world! Don't take it personally! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Damn you! Naga! You're actually being serious for once! This girl!

"Lina-san! This way!" Ignoring her, Tatiana said and started running.

It’s frustrating to show my back to Naga, but in a battle, if you win in the end, it's fine! The seamstresses and I ran together.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Do you think you can escape from this Marty IX!? Do it! Marty IX!"

RUMBLE-RUMBLE-RUMBLE! In response to Naga’s command, Marty IX resumed its advance, crushing the buildings around it! We rushed through alleys and ran down streets, moving through the town. Marty IX followed a little behind. I wanted to pull away, but the difference didn't widen at all—maybe its base speed is quite high.

"Not yet!? Tatiana!?"

"It's just there—I see it!"

Around the corner, where Tatiana pointed, was a crumbling building.

"Whaaaat!? No way, is that it!?"

It must have been a two- or three-story building originally. The part from the second floor up was cleanly blown away, leaving it almost in ruins. It was probably an atelier

destroyed in the conflict with Marty before I came to this town. Of course, I didn't think we could block the attack of Marty's Heavy Mobile Workshop by running into something like this. —However—

"Quick! This way!" Following Tatiana's lead, I ducked through the decaying door and into the building. And then—

BA-GAAAAN!

It was shortly after we jumped in that Heavy Mobile Workshop Marty IX smashed the ruins of the atelier.

—A damp air hung around us.

"Light." A small magical light lit up at my fingertip. The underground passage stretched straight into the depths of darkness where the light couldn't reach. Just in time—we had slipped into this secret passage through a hidden door just before Marty IX destroyed the atelier ruins.

"Further ahead is—my final atelier." Tatiana whispered as she looked into the darkness. "...This is an underground passage I prepared, sensing that this day might come... but I never thought I'd actually have to use it..."

"Anyway—let's keep moving. There's no guarantee they won't notice this hidden passage." At my words, everyone nodded and began walking deeper into the passage.

"...But... can we really beat that Marty IX...?" Seamstress A muttered in an anxious voice after we had walked for quite a long time. "When you think about it, its strength is abnormal. The surrounding buildings are made of stone too, but it knocks them down easily, and the workshop itself is undamaged. And to even withstand that explosion..."

"It's probably—magically reinforced." I said simply.

"Magical reinforcement...?"

"Yeah. For example, even something like a piece of kite string, if you reinforce it with magic properly, can become strong enough for a child to hang from. It's impossible for the whole building, but they probably treated the surface or something. But well, even with reinforcement, there's a limit, and I know that spell too. If I cast it on this remaining atelier, the conditions will be equal."

"Then—" I nodded deeply to the questioning seamstress.

"Our chance of victory is—more than enough."

"I'm relieved to hear that." It was Tatiana, who had been silent until then, who spoke. "The exit."

After she said that, we climbed quite a few stairs—and I was momentarily speechless at the sight that spread out before me. An endless stretch of green. Far below, I could see the faint lights of the town.

"It's about halfway up the mountain to the northeast of the town of Richelieu." Tatiana told the surprised me with a proud look. "And this is—the **Final Decisive Battle Fortress Workshop, 'Couture,'** which I built in case something like this happened!"

Tatiana, spitting out words that no longer had even a shred of connection to fashion design, pointed to where a stubby tower stood darkly against the starry sky.

"I'm back!"

The scouting seamstress returned to Tatiana's fortress workshop a little after noon. —It’s been two days since we hunkered down here. Incidentally, the first day was spent cleaning the rooms and reinforcing the workshop's surface. And finally, today. We started by gathering information.

I collapsed the secret passage from the town to here with my magic just in case, but even so, there's no guarantee the opponent won't find this place. Regardless, we need to check their movements. So, instead of me or Tatiana, whose faces are well-known, we had Seamstress B disguise herself as a town girl and go check the town's situation.

"How was it!?"

She nodded slightly to our question. "The enemy's Heavy Mobile Workshop, Marty IX, is sitting in the center of town and not moving. Marty’s faction was—having a victory party at a rented tavern to celebrate the defeat of Tatiana-sama!"

"Whaaaaaaaaaaat!?"

"Ah!? Tatiana-sama! Calm down!"

"It's just that foolish Marty assuming that on her own! There’s nothing for you to worry about, Tatiana-sama!"

An angry Tatiana. Seamstress trying desperately to soothe her.

"...A-And, now that they've let their guard down thinking they've defeated us, it's our

chance to counterattack! Right! Lina-san!?"

The seamstress turned to me, but I replied in a gloomy tone.

"—That's not necessarily true."

"...Eh...?" At my casual words, the movements of all the seamstresses and even Tatiana stopped.

"If it's a surprise attack, the orthodox move is to board Marty IX while they're away and destroy it from the inside... but if the opponent catches on and boards Marty IX first, we'll be easily counterattacked."

If they weren't in the middle of town, even if the surface was magically reinforced, I'd show them I can smash it with my spells... but as long as that "Nearby Roof Shield" is there, standard attacks won't work.

"Then—how about we move this 'Couture' and challenge them to a fight just like they did?"

At Tatiana's question, I shook my head left and right. "The strength might be equal, but there's no guarantee we'd win. If we even get a draw, it's one thing, but if we lose, it's no joke." —My true feeling was that I didn't want to do a second-hand version of Naga's idea, but I kept that to myself and said:

"Then... do you have any good ideas!?"

"...Hmm..."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! No need to think about such things, Lina Inverse!"

A familiar voice echoed around at that moment.

"Naga!?"

Looking in the direction of the voice, there were Naga, Marty, and their group of mysterious followers!

"How do you know about this place!?"

To the surprised Tatiana, Marty pointed to the seamstress who had been out on reconnaissance. "I saw her in town and followed her back."

"No way!? My perfect disguise, which I coordinated myself, was seen through!?"

"It was *too* perfect, that's how I knew. There's no way a girl nowadays would be dressed so 'typical'."

"Guh! Damn it!" Tatiana gritted her teeth at Marty’s point.

Hmm. Her obsession backfired in a weird way.

"So that's how it is. Sorry, but we're going to settle this right here! Lina!" As she spoke, Naga began chanting a spell. This is—Demonic Dragon Fire Flare!?

She's planning to smash this atelier!? If something like that is unleashed, no matter how much magical reinforcement we have, it'll definitely blast a hole in it!

"I won't let you!" The bamboo spatula thrown by Seamstress A, however, didn't reach Naga due to the magical barrier born during the spell chanting and flew off elsewhere.

—In that case! How about this!?

—Darkness beyond twilight, Crimson beyond blood that flows—

I dashed toward Naga and suddenly began chanting the Dragon Slave. Marty’s followers, who rushed in to stop me, were easily repelled by my magical barrier.

—Buried in the stream of time—

And then—Naga’s magical barrier and my magical barrier clashed!

BANG!

"Hya!?"

With a flashy popping sound, a numbing pain ran through my whole body!

"A-da-da-da-da-da-da-da!" I huddled down, crying out in pain. Naturally, my spell chanting was interrupted, but it was the same for Naga. It must have been very painful, as she was dancing silently a little distance away. ...I thought I could just cancel it out by hitting it with a magical barrier of equal or greater level, but... it certainly worked, but... I don't want to do that again.

"You!"

Taking advantage of the moment I was in pain, one of Marty’s followers came at me! Crap! But in that moment!

"Light!"

Simultaneous with the voice, a dazzling light flashed above my head! "Ugh!?" Marty’s followers were blinded and recoiled. It wasn't me. It was probably one of the seamstresses who had released it.

"—Tch! We're retreating back to town!"

Seeing she was at a slight disadvantage, Marty quickly issued a retreat order. The followers dragged their blinded comrades and Naga and hurried into the trees.

"—We won't let you escape!"

"Wait!"

I stopped the seamstresses who were about to give chase. "Chasing too far is dangerous! ...Well, I don't think there are any traps, but..." Truth be told, I wanted to give them a big parting gift as they ran away, but as long as the prickling pain hadn't vanished from my body, a big spell requiring concentration was impossible.

"...More importantly—who was it that sent that light just now?"

"...Ah... it was... me... was it bad...?" To the seamstress who spoke up apologetically, I gave a big smile.

"No. It helped. Thanks. And—I want to ask, can all of you use magic?"

Even if it's just a light spell, to arrange it so it flashes like that requires proper magical knowledge, not just memorizing the spell.

"Yes, more or less... we don't have time to do serious research, so none of us know attack spells or anything..."

"None of you—does that mean the other seamstresses have basic magical knowledge too?" The whole group nodded at my question.

"Hmm..." I thought for a moment—and then a grin spread across my face. "This—is usable."

RUMBLE-RUMBLE-RUMBLE-RUMBLE! Ripping through the forest, shaking the earth. The 'Couture' with us on board began its advance toward the town of Richelieu. The principle behind its movement was the same as the opponent's—arranging the stone golem creation spell to turn 'Couture' into a mobile fortress. Don't think of it as a cheap imitation. This one is a bit different from theirs.

...Well, due to the plan, the moving part isn't the whole building, but only the top floor. It's true it looks much smaller than Marty IX... but the plan is perfect! My damage has completely recovered!

"We're entering the town soon! Everyone, get into position!"

"Yes!"

At Tatiana's command, the seamstresses arranged themselves in a circle on the edge of the roof. Then Tatiana and I stood tall on the roof.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! So you've crawled back! Lina Inverse!" Naga's unnecessarily loud voice echoed around just as 'Couture' reached the outskirts of town. I see. She's using a wind-series spell to amplify her voice.

"I don't know what you're thinking. Do you think you can win against the Marty IX with that tiny, cheap imitation?" Marty's voice followed.

I chanted a quick spell to amplify our voices too. "Don't make me laugh! If you think this 'Couture' is just a copy of yours, you're dead wrong."

I looked at Tatiana and we both nodded deeply. "Ready!" At my command, the seamstresses standing by began chanting their spells. And—the spells were complete! Good! Start-up preparations okay! Then my command was given!

"Aerial Fortress Workshop 'Couture,' lift off!"

"Levitation!" The seamstresses' voices shouted in unison! And then—'Couture' soared into the air!

"—Wha...!?"

"No way!"

Naga and Marty's shocked voices. Hmph! Did you see that!? Be jealous! It was easy to teach the levitation spell to the seamstresses who already had the basics of magic. However, although they were casting it as a group to lift a heavy object, they couldn't lift the whole building, so we had to move with only the top floor.

"Couture, move forward! Target: enemy Heavy Mobile Workshop Marty IX, currently stationary in the center of Richelieu!"

"E-E-Even if you can fly, that doesn't make you great! Marty IX, move forward! Smash Tatiana's toy!" Marty's voice, tinged with panic.

Looking down from the sky, I could see Marty IX approaching, kicking down rows of houses. It's true, as Marty said, being able to fly doesn't necessarily make you superior. However—there are advantages other than just scaring the opponent. Eventually, 'Couture' and Marty IX closed the distance—

"Couture, ascend!"

In response to my voice, the seamstresses controlled the spell. 'Couture' gained more altitude. "Don't let them escape! Marty IX!" Two arms from Marty IX swiped through the air. But they only cut through the air fruitlessly. They couldn't reach 'Couture.'

"Stop moving forward! Ascend further!"

At my command, 'Couture' rose even higher. Marty IX could no longer reach us, no matter how much it stretched its arms. But then.

Thump. A small jolt and an explosion shook 'Couture.'

"What!?"

"It's Naga's magical attack." I replied to the panicked Tatiana in a calm voice.

This place doesn't have any defensive functions. If we take an attack spell from Naga directly below, we have no way to block it.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! What's the matter, Lina!? Your boastful aerial fortress is completely wide open from below!"

"Hmph. You don't understand, Naga." I said with plenty of composure to Naga's triumphant voice. "Let me ask... what do you think happens if the people currently casting levitation abandon this fortress?"

"....."

"Eeeeeeeeeeeh!?"

Before Naga and Marty could finish their screams: "Everyone, evacuate!"

At the same time as I shouted, Tatiana and I grabbed separate seamstresses. Then all the seamstresses kicked off the roof floor at once!

—Without missing the target—the 'Couture,' having lost its levitation, made a direct hit on Marty IX, which had stopped right below.

And so—in the sunset, the battle that had divided the town of Richelieu finally came to an end. Incidentally, since there was a fear Naga would recover and counterattack, we gagged and tied her up while she was unconscious and left her among the rubble.

"...Ugh... ow..." Marty, rising from the rubble, saw us standing nearby and let out a heavy sigh. "...I lose... it's my loss..."

"Kyaa!" Tatiana's seamstresses cheered at her declaration of defeat.

"...But remember this... I lose now, but as long as there are humans in the world... someday... innovative fashion will be born again..."

"Whaaaat are you saying, and why are you saying it like some Great Demon King of Evil!?"

Smack! Tatiana knocked Marty down.

"The 'howl of a losing dog' is unsightly! Anyway, since I've won like this, it's proven that formal style is justice! From now on, I can spread formal style to the world without any hesitation!"

"...Yeah, I don't think that's going to happen."

An unfamiliar man's voice suddenly came from nearby.

"...Wha... t... did... you... say...?"

In the direction Tatiana turned was a line of guards. There were about twenty or thirty of them.

"When the disturbance gets this big, it seems the townspeople couldn't take it anymore. Well, that's how it is, so I think you'll be eating prison food for about a decade." One of the men, who looked like the captain, said in a flat tone.

...N-Now that I think about it... we went wild with our momentum and personal grudges... but looking at it calmly, the town has become a bit of a crater... This is bad! At this rate, I'll be caught along with them! In that case!

"Tatiana-san! You were doing such terrible things!?"

Suddenly posing like a cute girl and using a high-pitched voice, I made my eyes watery. "How cruel! You were just using me! You dummy!" I turned and dashed!

"...Ah! Hey, you!?"

Ignoring the captain's call, I activated a spell! "Raywing!"

I soared into the sky with the high-speed flight spell! Secret technique! High-tailing it while everything is still vague! Good kids shouldn't imitate this! It's painful that I won't get the reward, of course, but it's better than being caught.

And so, I abandoned Tatiana—I mean, I left her there—and got out of there as fast as I could. What happened to Naga, who I left behind? Well, obviously, that's none of my business.

(Lina-chan's Great Fashion Strategy: END)

Slayers Superior:

Don't read this expecting a serious mystery drama, or you'll be disappointed!

April’s Case Files 2:

The Serial Grotesque Murder Case of the Three Beautiful Nurse Steam-Bathing Sisters with Pigtails, Braids, Sailor Uniforms, Cat Ears, and Glasses.

(Note: The title has absolutely nothing to do with the content.)

Characters

- **Flanagan Hannibal:** April’s uncle. A businessman.
- **Melissa:** Flanagan’s wife.
- **Mark:** The Hannibals' only son.
- **Rachel:** Mark’s girlfriend.
- **Robert:** Mark’s friend. The culprit.
- **Captain Zalakas:** Captain of the Cerulean City Guard.
- **April Landmark:** Someone who wants to be a famous detective with "purple brain cells."
- **Lina Inverse:** April’s assistant. (Wait, what?)

"Lina-kun, when a human being gets hungry, they tend to lose their temper more easily. Don't you agree?"

Bathed in the mild afternoon sunshine, the carriage rolled along through a garden

swathed in greenery.

"Nn-nn-nn-nn. Not really. Even if I'm not hungry, when I'm mad, I'm mad."

At my honest opinion, for some reason, the woman sitting across from me—April Landmark—showed a faint look of terror.

"...Ha... Ha-ha-ha-ha... Lina-kun. Your eyes are scary."

"Hmph. Is that so? Personally, I find the pitch-black *something* welling up in my own chest a lot scarier."

"...Now, now, now, now. I'm sure even you will be satisfied with today's meal, Lina-kun."

"Sure?"

"No, no! Definitely! Absolutely!"

Breaking into a greasy sweat, April shook her head violently from side to side.

—A little while ago—

At April's request, I had helped solve a certain case. Professionally speaking, there were a lot of things about it that ticked me off—but above all else, due to her blunders and incompetence, I didn't receive a single copper coin in commission. Not one.

To appease me while I was busy throwing a raging tantrum, she offered to treat me to a meal as compensation. Apparently, her uncle had struck it rich in business and bought a fallen noble's estate on the outskirts of town. That was where we were headed now.

...Wait...

We passed through the main gate a while ago and we're still driving...

I poked my head out of the carriage window and—

"W-Whaaaaaa!?"

I couldn't help but let out a shout of surprise.

An absurdly vast, impeccably maintained green garden. A chalk-white mansion looming ahead. The grounds were probably large enough to fit an entire small village.

"...W-Who is he...? Your uncle...?"

"I told you, didn't I? He was successful in business."

"...Well... that's *unbelievably* successful..."

"Oh, it's nothing much. There's a pond behind the building—the property ends once you circle that."

"There's a pond too!?" I yelled again.

I'd heard "fallen noble's estate," so I'd imagined a relatively large, stylish house, but this...

"My uncle is quite the fan of eating, you see. You can look forward to the food."

As April spoke, the carriage finally arrived at the mansion's entrance.

"Well, well, well! So you're Miss Lina Inverse? I've heard all about you from April."

In the mansion's needlessly spacious hall, we were greeted with a friendly smile by April's uncle, Mr. Flanagan. He looked to be in his early forties, with flecks of white beginning to appear in his black hair. He wasn't exactly "handsome," but he gave off the impression of a mild-mannered, pleasant man.

—Of course, having built up this much wealth, he probably wasn't just the person he appeared to be on the surface.

When I first heard April's story, I'd imagined a nouveau-riche old guy with tacky taste, but both his clothes and the interior decor were quite refined. Regardless, he stood there with an old butler by his side, smiling broadly.

"Oh? Are you wearing black clothes today? April told me you look great in a pink robe."

"Nn-nn-nn-nn-nn-nn-nn-nn."

Keeping the smile on my face, I grabbed April by the scruff of her neck, dragged her slightly into the shadows, and—

Thump! Bam! Whack!

"—Anyway, please forget that story."

Reappearing with a now-quiet April, I spoke pleasantly.

"Regardless, thank you for inviting me today."

"Think nothing of it. We can't offer much in the way of hospitality," Flanagan said

casually. "Well, until the meal is ready, please relax in the back—"

"—April-chan?! Is that you, April-chan?!"

The voice that interrupted the conversation belonged to a woman.

A wide hall with plush carpets and tapestries on the walls. From both ends of the room, staircases curved up to the upper floor. Running down those stairs was a blonde woman in a dress—

"Aunt Melissa!"

The moment April said that, she—Melissa-san—let the hem of her dress flutter gracefully, vaulted over the handrail, and—

BAM!

Using the momentum, she delivered a flying kick right into April's stomach!

"Oh, stop it. Honestly, April-chan. Calling me 'Auntie.' So formal. You can just call me Melissa."

"...Y... You're right... Melissa... san..."

"Allow me to introduce her." Flanagan put his arm around Melissa's shoulder and smiled at me. "This is Melissa. My wife. She's quite young for my spouse, isn't she? I wonder how many people have been sent to the hospital for failing to nod at that."

"Nice to meet you. I thought you were his daughter." I played along with Flanagan's casual remark.

"Oh, stop! You're so good at flattery! Hearing that makes me want to serve you something other than salt soup."

...Wait, so if I hadn't agreed, she was planning to serve nothing but salt soup? Oy.

Flanagan then gestured toward me. "And this is April's friend, Lina Inverse-san. Unlike April, she's a very accomplished young lady. You've probably heard the rumors, but apparently, she's a master of offensive spells."

"My, what a lovely girl," Melissa said instantly with a smile.

...Good grief...

"Well, it won't do to stand around talking here. Please, come inside. My son and his friends are here, so please enjoy their company."

"Then I shall show you the way."

As I followed Melissa deeper into the mansion, I whispered to April beside me.

"April... I want to hear your deduction on something."

"Deduction? What is it, Lina-kun?"

"By any chance... are you hated here with every fiber of their being?"

"...That is irrelevant to the current case..."

She said this and quietly looked away.

"Hey, April! Long time no see!"

Three people greeted us in the room. The one who stood up from his chair was a young man of about twenty with brown hair. His features looked a lot like Flanagan's.

"Let me introduce you. This is my son, Mark. And those two are Mark's friends, Rachel-san and Robert-san."

Melissa pointed to the other two: a blonde woman and a black-haired man roughly the same age as Mark. Then she pointed at me.

"This is April-chan's friend, Lina Inverse-san. She's a proper person."

"Heehh..."

"And she's April's friend?"

"That's a rarity."

The three spoke in succession.

.....Uhh.....

I glanced at April and whispered, "...You... what did you pull here last time?"

"I believe I said it was irrelevant to the current case," April said without meeting my eyes.

...Fine, whatever...

"Oh, Lina-san," Mark said as if he'd just remembered. "Actually, my father recently acquired a rare statue. We were just talking about taking a look at it. Would you like to join us?"

"Sure. I'll take you up on that."

There was still time before the meal anyway. I nodded at Mark’s suggestion.

"Then, this way."

Following Mark and the others as they stood up, April and I also headed for the door—

"—Oh?"

Just as we were about to leave, Mark turned around and said in a surprised tone, "April’s coming too? Huh."

...This girl... what on earth did she do...?

Feeling it might be better not to know, I didn't ask anything this time.

The room was on the third floor of the mansion. It had no windows, and in the dimness—

"Lighting!"

The magical light Mark created illuminated the room brightly.

The vast room was crammed with miscellaneous items. To an amateur's eye, it would look like nothing more than a storage room or a junk pile. However—

"—Wow. These are impressive."

"Oh, you can tell?" Mark asked in response to my mutter as I looked around. "My father also deals in art."

Yes. The items placed in the room were a mountain of artwork. Because first-rate and third-rate items were mixed together, it gave a very cluttered impression.

And then.

"It’s this."

Mark brought out a wooden box. He placed it on a table in the center of the room—also likely an art piece—and opened the lid. And what he took out was—

"—No way...!?"

I caught my breath and whispered in a raspy voice.

It was—a Dragon God statue about the size of a human head. It was likely modeled after the Flare Dragon. Compared to a normal dragon, its body was quite long and

slender, spiraling upward toward the heavens. The composition perfectly captured the tension and release of space, the boundary between motion and stillness. The craftsmanship was exquisite and precise.

Truly a top-tier work of art. And the material was a metal that showed a duller, deeper glow than silver—

Orichalcum! More precious than gold!

"...Incredible...!" I couldn't help but let the words slip out.

"...This... is silver?"

"It’s Orichalcum. Much higher quality than gold," I replied to Rachel, who was staring at it in wonder.

"Wow. Man. It must cost a fortune."

Despite Robert’s crass question, Mark didn't seem offended. "Well... it could probably buy a decent house. But more than that, isn't the craftsmanship great?"

"It really is... amazing..."

Surrounded by everyone, the Orichalcum dragon glowed brightly under the magical light.

Chilled pumpkin soup. Warm salad-style vegetables with roasted duck.

Every dish served was of excellent quality.

"Mmm. Exquisite. Using an odd orange instead of lemon in the dressing is a real tear-jerker."

"My. You can tell, Lina-san?" Melissa smiled happily at my comment. "Then—can you tell what’s in the next one?"

At her signal, a fish dish was brought out. Fried fish of some kind with two vibrant sauces, one green and one red.

"—Hmm, hmm."

I took a bite with my knife and fork—and subconsciously furrowed my brow.

It was delicious. Beyond reproach. The harmony of the two sauces. The way the fish was fried. The batter was crispy and had a good bite, and while the inside was cooked through, it hadn't lost its moist umami flavor.

However—

I just couldn't figure out what kind of fish it was. It was a white-fleshed fish, but its characteristics didn't match anything I knew.

"—According to my deduction—"

Suddenly, April opened her mouth beside me. "...Pacific saury?"

"Yes, yes, April-chan, please be quiet," Melissa brushed her off.

While everyone's eyes were on me, Robert spoke while waving his fork. "Hint: I caught it in the pond out back."

"In the pond?"

I became even more confused. I'd seen the pond in the back before the meal... it was big, but the water was a bit murky, and honestly, I didn't think it looked very clean. A fish caught there...

To the struggling me, Flanagan said with a mischievous smile, "It's Red Bass."

"Red Bass!? No way!?" I let out a startled cry.

They're large for freshwater fish, but their meat has a distinct smell, and they aren't very tasty. However, the dish on the plate had no such smell or quirk.

"...This? Really?"

"This guy just loves fishing," Mark said, gesturing toward Robert. "He's always coming over and dropping a line in the backyard pond. So, we wondered if we could use what he caught. Our chef put in a lot of effort—and this is the result."

"Seriously? How?"

"If you like, I'll tell him to teach you the cooking method later."

"Please do!"

Yes! That's one more dish added to my repertoire!

After the fish, veal steak was served. April took a bite and said with a serious face, "...According to my deduction, this ingredient is..."

"Beef, no matter who eats it."

The cold retorts from almost everyone at once were in perfect, chilling harmony.

The first thing I perceived was a voice.

"It’s a disaster, Lina-kun."

Hearing that the voice overlapping with the knocking was April’s—for the time being, I just opened my eyes in bed. The soft, warm blankets enveloping my body were infinitely comfortable. Last night, the conversation had picked up after dinner, so I ended up staying at Flanagan’s place and sleeping in a fluffy bed.

I didn't know what was so "disastrous," but there was no way I was going to give up this comfort just to deal with April’s sleep-talking—

"The Dragon God statue we saw yesterday was stolen."

My consciousness snapped awake instantly.

"Wait for me."

Saying that, I jumped out of bed and tidied myself up at top speed.

Waiting at the door was April, her face the picture of seriousness.

"—You're the culprit, aren't you?"

"Why would it be me!?"

WHAM!

Without hesitation, I delivered a spinning punch right to the top of her head.

"...It... It’s a simple deduction, Lina-kun..." She crouched down, clutching her head, yet she continued. "The incident happened on the night you stayed... so the culprit can only be...!"

"Listen. Did the idea that 'other people stayed here too' or 'this is the culprit’s method to make it look that way' ever cross your mind?"

"...Ugh..." She groaned and fell silent for a moment. "...That’s a pretty good point. Actually, I was just testing to see if you were fit to be my assistant. Be happy, Lina-kun. You passed. Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Who’s happy!?"

KICK!

My kick sent the crouching April somersaulting several times.

When we went down to the living room, everyone was already gathered. Flanagan, Melissa, Mark, and Rachel and Robert, who had also stayed over. In addition, there were several unfamiliar faces. All of those strangers were armed with light armor and swords. They were likely the city guards.

"—So, this is everyone who stayed over? Excluding the servants," said one man wearing slightly differently designed armor as he looked at April and me.

After waiting for everyone to take their seats, he looked around and began to speak.

"I am Captain Zalakas Mackingham of the Cerulean City 7th Guard. Between last night and early this morning—here, at the Flanagan Hannibal estate, third floor, an Orichalcum Dragon God statue was stolen."

Everyone seemed to know already, so there was no particular reaction.

"This morning, when the butler who woke up first walked down the hall, he discovered the lock to the storage room had been broken and forced open. He realized the Dragon God statue was missing."

The Captain continued. The mansion was three stories tall; the maids lived on the first floor, the second floor had guest rooms and recreation rooms, and the third floor had the storage room and the rooms of the owners, the butler, and the head maid.

"I've had my subordinates search, but the statue has not yet been found within the estate. And one more thing—"

Cutting his words short for effect, the Captain looked around at everyone again.

"At the time of the crime, every door and window in this mansion appears to have been locked from the inside."

"——!?"

This time, for sure, looks of unease crossed everyone's faces.

"...W... Wait a minute! Does that mean...?" Robert asked, his face pale.

The Captain nodded gravely. "Yes. It means it was a crime committed by someone inside. In other words—"

Looking around a third time: "The culprit is among us."

Silence fell over the room.

"—Of course—" After a brief pause, he spoke again. "There is the possibility it was one of the servants, so my subordinates are currently investigating that. However, since

we must consider all possibilities, please understand that we need to speak with you as well."

"...W... Was it really the work of someone inside?" Rachel asked in a worried tone. "I've heard that if you use magic, you can open and close locks... If that's the case, could it be a thief who just happened to come by...?"

"—I'm sorry, but that's impossible—"

I started to say—

CHOP!

"Ow!?"

I suddenly received a chop from the side—from April.

"...H-Hey! What was that for!?"

"That's my line, Lina-kun! This is exactly the moment when the purple brain cells of me, April Landmark, work behind the scenes!"

...Behind the scenes? So you're not going to be active in public...?

"What are you doing, saying the first line of a scene like this!"

She stood up, though no one had asked her to. "I'm sorry, but that's impossible, Rachel-kun."

"...Oh..." Rachel nodded vaguely.

"It is true that if you use a certain kind of sorcery, you can open a door's lock as you say. And you can also make a door unopenable with magic. However—making a door unopenable with magic simply means infusing it with magic so it won't open. It doesn't mean a latch or a lock that has been removed will return to its original state. In other words, returning it to the state the Captain called 'locked from the inside' is absolutely impossible, even using sorcery."

"Then, are you saying the culprit is indeed among us or the servants, April?"

At Flanagan's question, April gave a meaningful smile.

"Now, now. Calm down, Uncle. A case of this level is hardly even a mystery to my purple brain cells."

"...Wait, you don't mean...!?"

At my mutter, she nodded pompously.

"Yes. Within this head of mine, all the mysteries have already been solved, Lina-kun."

"Is that true!?" the Captain asked eagerly.

But April teased him. "Captain. I'd like to ask: wasn't the storage room door itself forcibly pried open by something?"

"That is... true, but..."

"Hmm. As I thought."

She seemed satisfied and looked around at everyone. "Uncle Flanagan is a bit of a celebrity in this town. But if you succeed in business, people will naturally grow envious. And it wouldn't be strange for someone with a slight interest in art to know that he acquired that magnificent Dragon God statue."

"...No... so who is the culprit?"

"Hmm... then let me put it bluntly." April nodded to the Captain, who was urging her on, and looked around with a pompous gesture—

"The culprit—is NOT among us!"

"Whaaaaaaaaaaat!?"

Everyone shouted in unison.

"...H-Hey! W-What do you mean by that!?"

To the Captain's question, April said calmly, "In other words—it was the work of an outsider. Whether it was a common thief, someone with a grudge against my uncle, or someone who desperately wanted the Dragon God statue—I don't know that much."

"...W-Wait a minute, April-chan. But the Captain said all the windows and doors were locked from the inside..."

"That's correct. We confirmed it with all the servants as well," the Captain agreed with Melissa.

But April smiled with confidence. "It's only natural to think that. However, that is exactly what made this case appear complicated."

"...I don't follow..."

The Captain frowned, but April puffed out her chest. "In other words, the truth of the incident is this. Last night, a thief broke into the estate through a window that had

been carelessly left unlocked, pried open the storage room door, stole the Orichalcum Dragon God statue, and escaped through a second-floor window facing the backyard."

"Then how did the culprit lock the window?"

"They didn't. A thief clumsy enough to break a storage room lock wouldn't pay attention to something like that."

"...Then how on earth...?"

"After the thief left. I, who happened to wake up and go into the hallway, found the window open, thought it was dangerous, closed it, and locked it."

"IT WAS YOUR FAULT!?"

PUNCH! KICK! SLAM!

Everyone’s kicks and fists slammed into April’s body!

"...W-What...!? What are you doing to me...!?"

"Say it first! Important things like that!" the Captain screamed, tearing his hair out.

"But... if I just normally said, 'Oh, by the way, when I woke up in the middle of the night, a window was open so I closed it,' then my big moment would be gone, wouldn't it?"

"You don't need one! Throw it away! Somewhere far away! If you’d said that first, we could have started investigating the outside-culprit angle much sooner!"

The Captain’s face turned bright red as he roared. I understood his feelings perfectly. Completely.

"...Hmph... If it’s come to this, I have no choice..."

The one who stood up slowly was none other than me.

"Captain. There’s only one way to easily resolve this situation."

"Huh? What is it? I won't listen to any more stupid opinions."

"No, no. It’s just about making it clear where the responsibility lies. So—"

I looked around at everyone and declared loudly!

"The culprit is April! Case closed! Everyone who agrees, raise your hand!"

Except for one person, everyone’s hands went up instantly.

"Okay, it’s decided!"

"Eh!?"

As April let out a small scream, Captain Zalakas grabbed her arm!

"I'll take that."

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeh!?"

As she screamed, another soldier grabbed her other arm and headed toward the doorway.

"...W-Wait! Wait a minute, you guys! A story this reckless...! Wait...! Wait...!"

"Come on. Shut up and walk."

"Wait a minuteeeeeeeee!"

Slam.

And so. The self-proclaimed purple brain cells were hauled away, and the case reached a tentative conclusion. All’s well that ends well.

Unaware of the incident at the mansion, the pond, full of water, lay quietly.

A small sound of water. The surface rippled. At the center of the spreading ripples was a single fishing line.

"Catching anything?"

At my question, the owner of the fishing line—Robert—gave a start.

"...H-Hey. Lina-san." He turned around with a slightly stiff smile.

By the pond in the mansion’s backyard. It was a little past noon.

After that. The Captain and his subordinates had left with April, and the rest of us had chatted and finished lunch.

"The Red Bass was really delicious. Catch plenty today, too."

"Y-Yeah..."

A vague answer—then silence. A long silence.

The rustle of leaves in the wind. The small sound of waves on the lake. Such things just filled the time.

"...Umm... if you stand there, the fish will..."

Perhaps unable to bear the silence, Robert spoke.

"Oh. Sorry, sorry." Saying that, I crouched down. "This is okay, right?"

"...A... yeah..."

An unconvincing reply. And silence once more.

"...But... was it okay? Really?"

This time, the silence wasn't very long.

"What was?"

"No... that Guard Captain... he really dragged April away... Even if it’s fine for April to be thrown in... I wonder if it’s okay that the case hasn't actually been solved."

"True. It might be bad. Regardless of April, the Captain might get scolded by his boss later... Hmm..."

After tilting my head for a bit, I clapped my hands.

"Oh. How about this? Since April’s deductions are always way off... Her deduction was that it was an outsider’s crime, but since that’s wrong, it means it was an inside job."

"An inside job...?"

"Yes. In the first place, it couldn't have been an outsider. The culprit only searched the storage room and only stole the Dragon God statue. A normal thief would have searched other places too and stolen things besides the statue. There were plenty of things that were lighter and looked more valuable. It’s also not an outsider who wanted the statue and had been to the house before. If it were, the culprit would be someone interested in art. However—they didn't even look at the other art pieces in the storage room. Even though some of them had as much artistic value as that statue. In other words—the culprit is limited to someone inside who is ignorant about art but knew that statue was quite valuable."

"....."

Robert said nothing. But the rod in his hand shook slightly.

"Now, next. Why did the culprit open the window? This has two meanings. First: to hide the stolen Dragon God statue somewhere. If the theft is discovered, a search begins. Naturally, they can't keep it on hand. But it’s also pointless to hide it somewhere that would be found immediately, like an empty room. And the other

meaning is to make it look like an outsider’s crime. ...Man... what a sloppy plan. Do you see it? The incredibly stupid blunder the culprit made."

"...No..."

"I thought so. The correct answer is: opening the second-floor window. Not the third floor where the theft happened, nor the first floor where they could reach the ground, but the second floor where the guest rooms are. Why do that? There’s only one reason. They had business on the second floor."

"...Business?"

"In my imagination—the culprit sank the statue in this pond. In this low-visibility water, you wouldn't see it even if it were sitting on the bottom. The problem is how to retrieve it. You can't exactly go around the pond with a net. But if you tie a string to the statue, you can pull it up by snagging it with something. The culprit thought that and used the tools they had in their room to rig the statue. Then, they dumped it into the pond from the hallway window on the same floor. ...Maybe the sound of that was why April woke up in the middle of the night."

Silence. For the umpteenth time.

"—It almost—sounds like I’m the culprit."

"I guess it would. Since that’s what I’m saying."

Flatly. I said it.

"The culprit stayed in a second-floor guest room last night, has no interest in art but knew that statue was expensive—and as a bonus, they're someone who can hang around here all the time without anyone getting suspicious. In other words, it can only be you."

...Heh...

At my words, Robert let out a small laugh while keeping his fishing line in the water.

"I think it’s an interesting deduction... but I’m not the culprit. You said earlier that opening the window was to make it look like an outsider... then couldn't the culprit have opened a second-floor window to make it look like someone staying on the second floor was the culprit? Or maybe they had a grudge against me and wanted to frame me. —That’s it. It could even be your own setup to get fame for solving the case or to get in good with the people of this house."

"I see. You can say anything if it’s just imagination."

"That’s right. There’s no evidence. —Just so you know, even if the statue is found in this pond, that just means part of your imagination was correct. It doesn't prove I’m the culprit. You get that, right?"

At that, I stood up.

"Oh. I have it. Other, proper evidence."

"...Huh...?" A look of confusion on Robert’s face. "Where?"

"You've been holding it."

I said that and snatched the fishing rod from Robert’s frozen hand. I pulled in the line and pointed.

"—So? With no bait and no float, just a thick line and a giant hook dropped in the pond, what exactly were you planning to catch? It certainly wasn't fish. So, what?"

"...Th-That’s...!"

Asked that, Robert was at a loss for words—

Rustle, rustle!

"Robert... it was you...!"

"Unbelievable..."

"Whoa!? Mark!? Rachel!?"

At the two who suddenly appeared, Robert let out a cry of surprise. The two seemed to have been crouching nearby until now, pretending to be garden trees.

...I mean, I did tell them to stay close without being noticed, but...

"To think you were the culprit..."

"I can't believe it."

Flanagan and Melissa, who had been pretending to be walls.

"Ehhh!?"

Robert cried out again. No, I was surprised too. I mean, even though I knew they were hiding, I didn't feel their presence or notice anything weird at all. Who exactly are these people...?

"...Just... give it up."

"Hiee!?"

A nearby garden stone transformed into Captain Zalakas in armor.

Robert was either in shock from being caught or from the way everyone appeared; either way, he froze for a moment—

"...Phew..."

As if resigning himself, he let out a small breath.

"...Yeah... that’s right... I did it... but... the reason wasn't just for money..."

"Ah, right, right. We'll hear the details at the station."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait!"

Robert protested as Captain Zalakas tried to lead him away without a care.

"I still have things to say! Like the secret of my complicated birth, my sad past, and various circumstances!"

"I don't want to hear it. At all."

"Agreed."

"Goodbye, Robert-kun."

"I won't forget you."

"For about two days."

We all spoke one after another.

The Captain grabbed Robert’s arm. "So, that’s that. Now, shall we go?"

"Wait! Wait for me! In the first place, it all started when my grandpa was traveling in Zephilia as a young man..."

Leaving behind the echoes of a story that sounded like it would be long.

Robert was easily dragged away by the Captain.

—And so—

The case was over. Truly.

In the backyard where the culprit had left, only the wind blew quietly.

"...But to think Robert was the culprit..."

Looking at the distant sky, Rachel said.

"Yeah... what a tragedy."

Mark also muttered while looking at the same place, and Flanagan and Melissa continued with somber expressions.

"Because of this, April will probably be out on the streets in a few days..."

"...It would be nice if they kept her locked up forever..."

...Uh... Umm...

"A... Excuse me..."

Timidly. At my question, the four pairs of eyes gathered on me.

"...What exactly did April do before...?"

The four who were asked looked back at the distant sky and said in turn:

"Please don't ask that, Lina-kun."

"There are some things one doesn't even want to remember."

"Besides... I think it’s better if you don't hear it."

"One doesn't like to air the family’s dirty laundry too much."

"....."

Being told that, I turned my gaze. To the far-off sky they were looking at.

And I—thought to myself.

—April, I don't know what you did, but anyway, just apologize.—

(April’s Case Files 2 (The Rest Omitted): The End)

Afterword

L: Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!?

Author: Whoa, what the—!? I haven't even finished my greetings yet!

L: "Greetings"? This is no time for that! What on earth is the meaning of this!?

Author: What... what do you mean, "the meaning of this"? What's what?

L: This book! This book right here! The title is *The Case Files of April*, and the new story is *The Case Files of April 2*!? What happened to *L-sama's Carefree Travel Diary: The Great Demon King of Dotonbori*, the one I advertised so heavily in the last afterword, that fans requested in letters, and that was blowing up on certain internet message boards!? What happened to your promise to write that!?

Author: I didn't! I never made such an advertisement or a promise!

L: *I* did!

Author: Why do I have to keep a promise *you* made!?

L: Why...? Well... you still want to live, don't you?

Author: I mean, you can't just say that like it's a perfectly normal thing. Especially while brandishing a food processor with the blades exposed in one hand. ...Wait, don't just casually plug it into the outlet! Don't plug it in!

L: So, you're going to write it, right?

Author: ...I mean... even if you say that... I've already finished writing the new story for this volume... and besides, if I write something like that, you'll just start complaining again, saying things like "I didn't have enough cool scenes!" or "The story is kind of lacking!"

L: That's not true. If I don't like the quality, I'll simply put the great words of the literary giant Hemingway into practice.

Author: Hemingway? What words?

L: As he said:

> *"Words are unnecessary. You just need a chainsaw or something."* —By Ernest Hemingway

Author: HEMINGWAY WOULD NEVER SAY THAT!! Wait, so either way, I'm destined to become mincemeat!?

L: What are you talking about? If you just write a story I like, everything's solved.

Author: Fine, let me ask: what kind of story would be good then?

L: Eh? Hmm... asking so suddenly... well... you know how in foreign movies dealing with monsters, they often have plots like this? A strange incident occurs in the city. A detective gets involved. Before the detective investigating the case, a person shrouded in a mysterious atmosphere appears. And that person is actually not human—that kind of synopsis. How about going with that sort of vibe!?

Author: Hmm. I see. So something like this? *—Detective Suekabu, who works at the Dotonbori Police Station, receives a report of a strange incident—*

L: Wait, wait. Hold on.

Author: What? All of a sudden.

L: Was there ever a Dotonbori Police Station? And the detective's naming is unreservedly lazy.

Author: Don't worry about it. It's just an outline. There's no point in sweating the details here. Continuing... *—The incident takes place at Dotonbori's Hikkake Bridge, famous for the Glico neon sign. A group of hosts in black suits, who had been calling out to passersby, were utterly crushed by a blonde girl, presumably a foreigner, wielding a spiked hammer—*

L: I said, wait! That part!

Author: It's a "strange incident," right? A spiked hammer. A *spiked hammer*. If you don't call that strange, what do you call it?

L: ...Well... it's definitely strange beyond belief, but... something is fundamentally...

Author: And so, Detective Suekabu continues his investigation day after day. A mysterious old man from Shinsekai who drops suggestive lines. A rookie comedian who

takes a stubborn stance, saying he can't go against the company. Amidst meeting various people... Detective Suekabu, wandering through Namba at night, exhausted, is called out by someone. And there— *A single girl, slurping Kinryu Ramen on the roadside, with a spiked hammer sandwiched between her legs*— Wait, wait, wait! Why are you turning on the food processor!?

L: *Heh, heh, heh.* I said "mysterious." What is that visual!?

Author: Ramen on the roadside. Spiked hammer between the legs. It's quite a mystery. A mystery. Therefore, mysterious.

L: ...No... when I say "mysterious," I don't mean "weird," I mean "enigmatic" or "mystical"... ...Fine, whatever. I'm done. Instead, have the food processor!

Author: W-Wait...!

(Modern technology unleashing its power)

L: Well then. Now that tonight's side dish has been decided as hamburger steak. Even though the main *Slayers* series has ended, it seems the short stories here are going to drag on persistently. I'm sure the author will eventually have a change of heart and write my side story, or my true history, or my mystery-romance, or my... (the following twelve pages omitted). By then, the author will probably have recovered from being a hamburger steak anyway. ...I wonder what would happen if I mixed in some ground chicken right now... Well, putting that aside. Regardless of everything, see you all in the next *Slayers Special*! ♪

(Afterword: End)